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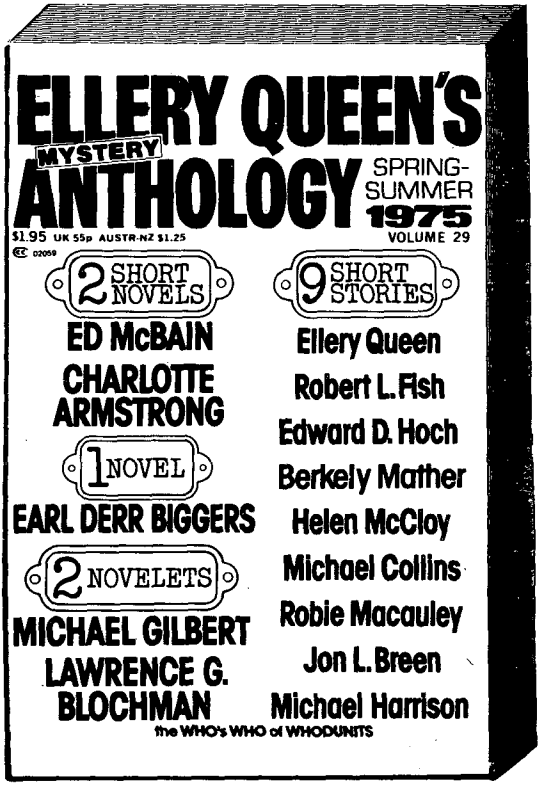

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The World's Leading Mystery Magazine

ELLERY QUEEN'S
Mystery Magazine

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a *NEW* short story by

DICK FRANCIS

Dick Francis is a former professional jockey who became Great Britain's champion steeplechase rider and was the jockey for the Queen Mother for four years. When Dick Francis turned to writing, he naturally chose horseracing as his major theme; but we can't help wondering if he realized in the beginning how many different angles his milieu would offer him, how many different facets of horseracing would lend themselves to stories of crime and detection . . .

Mr. Francis' newest short story deals with a crime that requires the greatest of finesse. As Martin Retsov said, "This is like stealing the Mona Lisa" . . .

NIGHTMARES

by DICK FRANCIS

For three years after his father died Martin Retsov abandoned his chosen profession. To be successful he needed a partner, and partners as skilled as his father were hard to find. Martin Retsov took stock of his bank book, listed his investments, and decided that with a little useful paid employment to fill the days he could cruise along comfortably in second gear, waiting for life to throw up a suitable replacement.

A day's travel put him a welcome distance from the scene of his unhappier memories, although they themselves journeyed along with him, as inescapable as habit. Thoroughbred Foodstuffs, Ltd. gave him a month's trial as a salesman and when the orders swelled everywhere in his wake, a permanent post. Martin Retsov relaxed behind the wheel of the company car and drifted easily around his new area, visiting stud farms and racing stables and persuading their managers that even if Thoroughbred

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Foodstuffs were no better than anyone else's, at least they were no worse.

The customers of Thoroughbred Foodstuffs saw a big man in his late thirties with a rugged, slightly forbidding face and a way of narrowing his eyes to dark-lashed slits. The frank, open, and sincere stock-in-trade expression of a salesman was nowhere to be seen, nor was there any obvious honey in his voice. The one factor which brought out the handshakes, the fountain pens and the checkbooks was his formidable knowledge of horses. He could sum up a horse in a glance and make helpfully constructive suggestions in a throwaway fashion, never taking credit although it was due.

"I expect you've tried remedial shoeing," he would say casually, or "Don't you find vitamin B12 injections help build bone?" Second time around he was greeted as a trusted friend.

He prospered.

All the same he was in trouble. There was no peace in his sleep. When he slept, he woke always from a nightmare, his heart thumping, his skin prickling with cold instant sweat. Always a dream variation on the same theme—the violent untimely death of his father. Sometimes he saw the face, dead but still talking, with blood gushing out of the mouth. Sometimes he saw the wheel, the great fat black sharp-treaded tire biting into the soft bulging belly.

Sometimes he felt he was inside his father's body, slipping and falling behind the loaded motor horsebox and having the life crushed out of him in one great unimaginable explosion of agony. Sometimes, but not so often, he saw the face of the other man who had been there, the callous man in the dark clothes, looking coldly down at his dying father and giving him no comfort, saying not a word.

Every morning Martin Retsov stood wearily under the shower, rinsing the stickiness from his body and wishing he could as easily sponge his subconscious mind. Every day, sliding into the car, he shed his night self and looked to the future. He saw foals born, watched them grow, traced their fortunes at auction and beyond. He could have told the trainers, better than they knew themselves, the breeding, history, career, and fate of every horse he reached with Thoroughbred food.

After nearly three years he had made many acquaintances—he was not a man to make friends. He knew every horse over a wide stretch of country and hundreds that

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had been sold out of it. He was the most efficient salesman in his company. And even his nightmares were at last becoming rarer.

One evening in early spring he picked up Johnnie Duke. A hitchhiker, a tall thin fair-haired youth looking not much above 20, wearing faded jeans and an old leather jacket and carrying a few extra clothes in a canvas hold-all. Martin Retsov, in an expansive mood, took him to be a college kid on vacation and agreed to drop him 40 miles down the road in the next town.

"Haven't I seen you before?" he asked, half puzzled, as the young man settled into the front seat beside him.

"Shouldn't think so."

"Well . . ." He thought it over. "Yeah, I've seen you. Day or two ago. Where would that be?"

The young man took his time over answering. Then he said, "I hitch up and down this road pretty regular. Maybe you saw me thumbing."

Martin Retsov nodded several times. "Yeah, yeah. That's it." He relaxed in his seat, glad to have resolved the small mystery. He liked to be sure of things. "That's where I've seen you. On the road. More than once."

The young man nodded briefly and said he was glad Martin had stopped for him because he had a date with his girl.

"I don't often stop for hitchers," Martin Retsov said, and thought with amusement that three easy years must have softened him.

They drove amicably together for five miles and passed alongside the white railed paddocks of a prosperous stud farm. Martin Retsov cast a rapid assessing eye over the small groups of animals grazing the new spring grass but kept his thoughts unspoken.

It was Johnnie Duke who said, "It's odd you never get a piebald thoroughbred."

"You know about horses?" Martin Retsov asked, surprised.

"Sure. I was raised with them."

Martin Retsov asked him where, but the young man evasively said he'd had some trouble back home and left in a hurry, and he didn't exactly want to talk about it. Martin Retsov smiled. He dropped Johnnie Duke in the next town and drove on toward his destination, and it was only when he stopped to fill up his tanks that the remains of the smile vanished as smartly as investors in a depression.

Johnnie Duke had stolen his billfold. Retsov kept it in the

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inside pocket of his jacket, and his jacket, owing to the efficiency of the heater, had been lying on the back seat of the car. He remembered Johnnie Duke putting his hold-all on the floor behind the front seats, and he remembered him leaning over to pick it up. His rugged face hardened to something his customers had never seen, and the eyes slitted as narrow and glittery as ice chips. The sum of money he had lost was small compared with the affront to his self-respect.

For several days he drove round his area actively searching for Johnnie Duke, remembering details about him from their drive together. The hesitation when Martin had said he'd seen him before. The refusal to say where he'd come from. The slickness with which he'd spotted and extracted the billfold. Martin Retsov searched for him with a hard face but without success, and finally after two or three weeks he accepted the fact that the young man had gone away to another district where irate victims in cars were not looking for him, sharp-eyed.

Regularly once a month Martin Retsov called at the farthest stud farm in his area, and it was as he left there, early one evening, that he again saw Johnnie Duke. Standing by the roadside, lifting his thumb, hesitating perhaps when he saw Retsov's car.

Martin drove up fast beside him, braked to a wheel-locked standstill, opened his door, and stood up smoothly outside it. For a big man he moved like oiled machinery, precise and efficient; and he held a gun. "Get in the car," he said.

Johnnie Duke looked at the barrel pointing straight at his stomach and turned pale. He swallowed, his larynx making a convulsive movement in his neck, and slowly did as he was told.

"I'll pay back the money," he said anxiously, as Martin Retsov slid onto the seat beside him. The gun was held loosely now, pointing at the floor, but both were aware that this could change.

"I should hand you over to the police," Martin Retsov said.

The young man dumbly shook his head.

"Or you could do a little job for me instead."

The young man looked at Martin Retsov's slitted eyes and visibly shivered.

"Is this blackmail?" he asked him.

"I'll pay you, if you're any good."

"Doing what?"

"Stealing horses," Martin Retsov said.

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He made his plans as meticulously as in the old days with his father, untraceably buying a two-horse trailer and a car to pull it, and hiding them away in a city lockup garage. He decided against the large type of motor horsebox he had used with his father, mostly because of the nightmares about those wheels. Besides, he was not sure if his new apprentice would be suitable for long-term planning. They would do one trial run—a test, Martin Retsov thought, before he offered a steady partnership for the future.

Johnnie Duke had greeted Martin Retsov's announcement of his chosen profession with a huge relieved grin.

"Sure," he said. "I can steal horses. Which ones?"

"It's not so easy round here," Martin Retsov said. "Training stables and stud farms have good security arrangements." But he knew them all; he had been assiduously studying them for three years.

He gave Johnnie Duke a list of things to buy and some money for himself, and two days later they inspected together the resulting mole-grip wrenches and steel-cutting saw.

"There is no time to waste," Martin Retsov said. "We will go ahead tomorrow night."

"So soon?"

Martin Retsov smiled. "We are taking two brood mares. One is near to foaling. We want her safely away before that happens."

Johnnie Duke looked at him in long surprise. "Why don't we take good fast racers?" he said.

"They're too easily identified. Tattoo marks and registrations see to that. But foals, now. Newborn foals. Who's to say which is which? So we take a top-class mare, now in foal by the best sire, and we drive her a long way off and sell her at the end of the journey to some owner or trainer who is glad to get a fabulously bred foal for a fraction of what it would cost him at auction.

"The star foal is swapped soon after birth with any other one handy, and is registered and tattooed in its new identity. Its new owner knows what he's really got, so after racing it he keeps it for stud. Some of my clients in the past have made millions out of these foals. I always collect a small percentage."

Johnnie Duke listened with his mouth open.

"This is not casual thieving," Martin Retsov said with a certain pride. "This is like stealing the Mona Lisa."

"But what happens to the brood mare afterwards? And to the other foal?"

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"Some of my clients have consciences. For these, for a consideration, I collect the mare and foal and dump them in any convenient field. If the owner of the field is honest, she gets identified and sent home."

Johnnie Duke did not ask what happened when the client had no conscience. He swallowed.

"Do you already have a buyer for the two we're taking tomorrow?" he asked.

"Of course. You don't steal a Leonardo da Vinci on spec." Martin Retsov laughed at the idea, showing a strong row of teeth. "When we've got the mares I'll tell you where to go. You will go alone. And you will bring back the money."

Johnnie Duke was again surprised. "Can you trust me?" he asked.

"I want to find out."

The following evening at dusk they collected the newly bought car and hitched on the trailer. Martin Retsov had difficulty maneuvering the two linked vehicles in the small courtyard which enclosed the lockup garage, and Johnnie Duke, trying to be helpful, went to the rear of the trailer to report how much space there was for reversing.

"Get away from there," Martin Retsov said sharply. "Get away at once." He stood up out of the car and Johnnie Duke saw that he was shaking.

"I was only—" he began.

"You are never to go behind the trailer. Understand? Never."

"Well, all right. If you say so."

Martin Retsov took several deep breaths and wiped the palms of his hands on his trousers. He was horrified at the strength of his own reaction. Three years, he thought, had hardly blunted the terror at all. He wondered whether, if his nerves were so jumpy, it might not be better to abandon the whole project. He wondered whether the fact that it had taken him three years to get back to his business meant that deep down he was afraid to get back.

He licked his lips. His heartbeat settled down. This time there would be no ambush when he took the horses. That last time his potential client had betrayed him to the police, but this time it was perfectly safe. This client had bought three top-grade foals in the past and had been delighted to hear he could now have two more. Martin Retsov eased himself back into the car, and Johnnie Duke climbed in beside him.

"What's the matter?" Johnnie asked.

"I saw an accident once. Man

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fell behind a horsebox."

"Oh."

Martin Retsov shut his mouth on the untellable details, but they rolled on inexorably through his mind. The ambush. Police spotlights suddenly shining out before his father was safe up beside him in the horsebox's cab. He'd had to reverse a yard or two to get a clear run at the only space left between the police cars and the fence. He'd thrown the lever, stamped on the accelerator, shot backward—he would never forget his father's scream. Never.

Just one scream, cut short. He'd jumped from the cab and seen the tire cutting into the belly, seen the blood pouring out of the dying mouth . . . and the other man, the policeman, standing there looking down and doing nothing to help.

"Help him!" Retsov had said frantically.

"Help him yourself."

He leaped back to the cab, climbed panic-stricken into the driving seat, knowing even as he pushed at the gear lever with a disembodied hand that his father was dead.

Dead. Past help, past saving, past everything.

He rolled the horsebox forward off the crushed body and he kept on going. He took the police by surprise. He drove the horsebox at 65 for two miles, and long before they caught up he had abandoned it and taken to the woods.

The police had not known his name, which he prudently never divulged to his clients. All the police had was one quick sight of him *in extremis*, which was not enough, and evasion and escape had in the end proved the smallest of his personal problems.

He had never forgotten the face of the policeman who had looked down at his father. A senior policeman, wearing authority and insignia. He saw him too often in his uneasy dreams . . .

Martin Retsov shook off the regretted past and applied his concentration to the theft in hand. He had expected to feel the old anticipation, the old excitement, the pleasing racing of the pulse. He felt none of these things. He felt old.

"Come on," said Johnnie Duke. "Or it will be light again before I deliver the goods."

Martin Retsov nodded unwillingly and committed them both to the enterprise. Half an hour later when they pulled up in a dark sideroad he had succeeded in thrusting his soul's shadows back into their closet and was approaching the next half hour with cool, calm practicality.

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They stepped quietly from the car and let down the ramp of the trailer. The night closed around them—small sounds, light sighing wind, stars showing in sparkling bunches between grayly drifting clouds. Traffic on the high road half a mile away swept past now and then, more a matter of flashing lights than of noise. Martin Retsov waited for his eyes to grow used to the dark, then he put his hand lightly on the young man's arm.

"This way," he said. His voice was a gentle whisper and when he moved his feet were soundless on the grass verge. Johnnie Duke followed him, marveling at the big man's silence and easy speed.

"Where are we?" Johnnie whispered. "Whose horses are we taking?"

"Never you mind."

They came to a gate, padlocked. The wrenches and the saw made it easy. They slid through into the field. Martin Retsov whistled gently in the dark, a seductive gypsy trill in the teeth.

He pulled out a handful of Thoroughbred horse nuts and called persuasively into the blackness ahead.

"Come on then, girl. Come on."

There was a soft warm whinny and movement somewhere out beyond sight. Then they came, slowly, inquiringly, moving toward the human voice. They ate the nuts held out to them and made no fuss when the two men took hold of their headcollars.

"You go ahead," Martin Retsov said softly to Johnnie Duke. "I'll be right behind you."

They went sweetly, the two great mares big with four-legged assets. Out of the gate and down the road to the transport. Easy as ever, thought Martin Retsov, once you knew what to take. Johnnie Duke led his mare into the trailer and fastened her there.

And that was when the nightmare began again. That was when the lights shone out, blinding Martin Retsov's adjusted sight. That was when the man stepped out to confront him. The same man. The face from the dreams. The same callous face, dark clothes, high-rank insignia.

"Martin Retsov," he was saying, "I arrest you—"

Martin Retsov was not listening. He was thinking wildly that it simply couldn't be true. This particular client would never betray him. Never.

The police took the mare from his unresisting charge and put handcuffs round Martin Retsov's wrists.

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"How did you get here?" he asked.

"We've been looking for you for three years," said the policeman. "A few weeks ago we found you. But we had no conclusive evidence against you, so we've been keeping you in sight ever since."

Johnnie Duke came out of the trailer, and Martin Retsov thought it was hard on the boy, being caught on his first job. The cold policeman walked over to him, looking satisfied.

He brought out no handcuffs. He patted Johnnie on the shoulder.

"Well done, Sergeant Duke," he said.

"Q"

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a *NEW* police procedural by

LAWRENCE TREAT

In which Mitch Taylor, Homicide Squad, gets tangled in a professional football caper, and maybe he should have stood in bed. You see, Mitch's wife Amy had this cousin of hers, this Hamilton (Ham) Burney, who was an all-league defensive guard, and Ham had big ideas. And a big idea in the gambling racket can lead to big trouble . . . Another brash, breezy police procedural that, so far as it goes, tells it like it is . . .

B AS IN BRIBE

by LAWRENCE TREAT

What with the way the world was going these days, Mitch Taylor figured he was doing all right. Here he was pulling down his regular weekly bunch of the green stuff, he was getting along with the rest of the gang on the homicide squad, and he had his health and a couple of pretty good kids.

But most of all, even after ten years of marriage, Amy was still something special. Not just the way she looked, which was okay in any language, but the kind of dame she was and the way she backed him up, and irregardless, too. About the only trouble with her was this cousin of hers, and nobody could call him *her* fault.

The thing was, while Amy wasn't exactly interested in football, every once in a while Mitch happened to leave the paper open at the sports section and she couldn't help seeing it. There was maybe a picture or else a news item on Ham Burney, all-league defensive guard.

"He's my cousin," she said the first time she noticed his name. "We practically grew up together."

"No kidding!" Mitch said. "How come you never mentioned it before?"

"There was no particular reason to. And besides, I was

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only seven when his family moved away."

"How old was he?"

"Nine," she said, studying the picture. "He's handsome, isn't he?"

She kind of sighed, and Mitch figured there was something more to this, so he said, "Seen him lately?"

"Oh, no. Not since he was nine. But he did something wonderful for me. I don't think I ever told you, did I?"

"Did what?"

"Told you about the time he rescued me? Some boys got hold of me and wanted to do things. They were much older than Ham, and although he was big for his age it was a brave thing for him to do, to take them all on. He could have been killed. I'll never forget it. I'll never be able to do enough for him." She sighed again and said, "I wonder what he's like now."

Mitch, who knew his statistics, answered that one. "Six-four, and weighs two-seventy."

"His name's Hamilton," Amy said, "although people always called him Ham."

And maybe he was, Mitch told himself. Still, why bother thinking about him? Except once in a while when they were all talking football in the squad room and somebody happened to mention Burney, Mitch would say, kind of casual-like, "Oh, him? That's Amy's cousin."

It would have been okay, too, if that was as near as Ham came into Mitch's life, but a lot of things can happen. While Mitch couldn't say that the breaks were always against him, on the other hand he could have used a little more luck, and used it nicely, too.

It was one of those days you could forget ever happened. Mitch had to hang around court most of the morning, and then the case got held over on account some lawyer maybe had a cousin who knew the judge's wife and had gone and whispered something in the judge's ear, maybe about a tip on the stock market or else a pinochle game tonight.

Anyhow, around noon the judge decided to let Mitch and the rest of the witnesses go home, so Mitch had himself a submarine over at the Greek's before hoofing it back to headquarters. By then there was no squad car available, and it started to rain and Mitch had to scout around knocking on doors down on James Street to see if he could dig up a witness to that assault business last night.

Most of the doors got slammed in his face and he got called a pig a few times. Then when

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he walked out of Number 347 East, some dame spit down from an upstairs window, and the trouble was, her aim was good. While the rain washed most of it off, it didn't help things, either.

What with all that rain, the buses were jammed, and the one Mitch got on, he didn't know the driver and he had nobody to talk to. So he was glad to get off at his corner, and finally he got to feeling better. Like always, Amy heard him stick his key in the door of the apartment and she met him coming in and gave him the news.

"Ham called today," she said. "He's coming to visit us for a few days."

"Here?" Mitch said.

"Yes, of course."

"He pulls down fifty or a hundred grand a year and he wants to stay here?"

"I asked him to," Amy said.

"Tell him he'd be better off at the Hilton. He maybe thinks we got a mansion waiting for him."

"I told him we had a small place and I suggested a hotel, but he said he had reasons and would rather come here if we had room for him."

"Only we don't," Mitch said, feeling he'd had a narrow escape.

"But it's all arranged," Amy said. "Joey's going to sleep downstairs with the O'Connors, and Mamie's going to stay with her friend Beth. We'll use their room, and Ham can take ours."

"Why not the other way round?" Mitch said, trying to rescue something out of the argument. "Let him have the kids' room, and we stay put."

"A big man like that," Amy said. "He needs a double bed. And what if we're uncomfortable for a few nights? It's the least we can do for him."

"I guess so," Mitch said. On account if Amy wanted it that way, it was okay with him. Still—

Ham flew in on an early afternoon plane, and that evening Mitch found him making himself at home in the living room. Amy was beaming and she'd cooked one of those stews of hers, the kind you could sniff when you came up the landing and everybody in the building wished they'd get invited.

The kids weren't saying much, they were just staring goggle-eyed at one of the biggest guys they'd ever seen. He was talking football, but even Mamie hardly looked at Mitch when he came in. Joey was up on Cloud Nine, but the worst of it was, this Ham guy took a shine to Mitch right off.

"Amy's been talking about you," he said, holding out a

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paw the size of a Frisbee. "Did she tell you about the time I beat up five kids that were trying to drag her into a back lot?"

"Yeah," Mitch said, wondering why the guy had come here instead of to a hotel. "Must have been quite a battle."

"They were older than me," Ham said, "and I just happened down the street when—"

Mitch sort of half-listened, and then managed to break away and head for the bedroom. There he unholstered his gun and stuck it up on the top shelf of the closet, where he always put it so it would be out of reach of the kids. When he turned around, Amy was standing there.

"I know it's going to be hard for you," she whispered, "but I owe him so much, I can never do enough for him. You'll be nice to him, won't you?"

"Sure," Mitch said. "Why wouldn't I?"

She kissed him and said in a low voice, "I knew you would."

Mitch wondered what all the fuss was about. Granted he'd rather see Ham play than hear him talk, but the guy was here, and what could you do about it? So Mitch settled down and listened, and every once in a while he kind of muttered something, while he hoped Ham would tire himself out and go to bed early.

Naturally, though, it didn't work out that way, because right after dinner, when Amy was in the kitchen, Ham took Mitch aside. Ham spoke confidentially, like he was tipping Mitch off to a secret play. "Mitch," he said, "let's go down the street and have ourselves a drink."

Mitch did his best to get out of it. "Thanks," he said, "but I got to hit the sack early. Maybe some other time."

Only Ham wouldn't let him go. "Something I want to tell you," he said. "Something in your line."

That was different, so they went down to the corner bar. After everybody'd said hello to Ham and wanted his autograph, him and Mitch sat down by themselves and Ham got down to business. He leaned over the table and spoke like he was still tipping Mitch off to a new play.

"Mitch," he said, "ever hear of Bluebird Yancy?"

"Blue?" Mitch said, wondering what Ham had to do with a crooked gambler that half a dozen police departments wanted to nail and couldn't. "Him? What about him?"

"Or Nate Brigham and Jerry Nick?"

"Who you trying to kid?" Mitch said.

Ham looked pleased, like he'd

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just blocked a field-goal kick that would have tied it all up. "Well," he said, "I can see what it is to live on your salary. If you were on the vice squad, for instance, the dough would be pouring in, but for a homicide man it must be kinda tough."

"I get along," Mitch said. "What's on your mind, Ham?"

"I got an appointment to meet Bluebird and a couple of his boys," Ham said. "That's why I'm here, and not registered at any hotel—so I can get together with them in private and talk things over."

"Are you nuts?" Mitch said. "Lay off or you'll end up in the clink. Unless they put a knife in your big belly first."

Ham thought that was funny. "I can take care of myself," he smirked.

"Not with them," Mitch said. "Stay away from them or you'll get hurt. I'm not kiddin'."

"I got a scheme," Ham said. "First off, I'll see them this once, and then never again. After the arrangement is made, I call from a pay phone and all I tell them is what the team feels like, who's injured that nobody knows about. Things like that. Nothing crooked, nothing I can go to jail for, but they pay for that kind of inside dope, and particularly for a team like ours that figures to win the title. And while I make plenty, I don't mind telling you that I'm in hock up to my neck. So—are you with me?"

Mitch didn't answer right off. While it was poison to sit down at a table with Ham and a gambler like Blue, and while this was straight bribery, still—he was Amy's cousin. And she wanted to do something for him, didn't she?

Maybe there wasn't much of the gray stuff inside that skull of Ham's, but Amy'd take it hard if he got in real trouble. And he was heading straight for it, because a guy like Blue would pick him clean and then throw out the soup bones. And besides, if Mitch played it cagey, maybe he'd get something on Blue and those pals of his.

It took Mitch a while to think things out. Because, while he wasn't going to get trapped into anything, there was no reason why he couldn't say okay, then talk it over with the lieutenant in the morning. If the lieutenant vetoed it, all Mitch had to do was tell Ham he'd changed his mind. And if the lieutenant told Mitch to go ahead, then Mitch was covered.

Ham kept waiting for Mitch's answer, and while Mitch didn't usually put on an act, this time he kind of poured it on. He frowned, licked his lips, took another gulp of beer, and fi-

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nally gave his answer.

"Okay," he said. "Why not?"

He checked with Lieutenant Decker the next morning. First off, Decker was against it. "A character like Blue will spot you a mile away," he said. "And even if he doesn't, it's not our bailiwick. Our jurisdiction is crimes against the person, so where do we come in?"

"If Blue scares off when he sees me," Mitch said, hoping it would work out that way and keep Ham on the up and up, "then what do we lose? But if he goes through with it and thinks I'm there for my shake, then maybe I can get enough evidence on him to turn over to the rackets squad. Maybe, for instance, you could tape me."

"It's the other way round," Decker said. "*They'll* be taping *you*. And maybe that tape will be worth getting hold of. It might even be a piece of evidence we're entitled to, on the theory that it's an invasion of privacy and therefore a crime against the person." The lieutenant leaned back in his chair, let the swivel squeak, and said kind of slow, "Maybe. Just maybe. But brother! Somebody's sure being devious."

There was nothing devious about Ham, though. He ate up practically everything on the table, and Joey and Mamie looked kind of bewildered that there was nothing left for seconds. And when Ham took a shower he stayed in the bathroom a half hour or so and left the place a mess. He busted a chair on account he was too heavy for it, and he broke Joey's bat in half just to show how strong he was.

Mitch kind of wondered how long Amy could take it. She still had this "thing" going for Ham. No matter what he did, she couldn't hold anything against him, but it was pretty tough on the rest of the family. Mitch was starting to figure out a few ways of getting Ham to leave when Ham said he'd heard from Blue. The meeting was all set and would Mitch come along? And that was how come he and Ham came to take a cab to some bar over in the river area, where Yancy and his troops were waiting.

They shook hands all around, and they all got introduced. Nate Brigham, Jerry Nick, Mitch Taylor. It could have been a business conference, and in a way it pretty much was.

Mitch had got a description of the Bluebird, but even so, it was hard to believe that this little dumpy guy with the bald head and the sad eyes was one of the top gamblers in the country, who'd been mixed up in a dozen kinds of dirty business

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but never got nailed down. Except that when he spoke up and you heard that voice of his, rich and deep enough to drown out everybody else, you knew he was something more than the little squirt he looked like.

Right off it seemed that Blue hadn't tumbled to who Mitch was, and Mitch was a little surprised that Blue didn't handle himself better. Because the way he blocked off the side of the booth where he wanted to sit, it was pretty obvious what he was after. He wanted a view of Brigham over at the bar, so he could signal or get signals. Jerry Nick sat on the inside, next to Blue, with Ham opposite Nick and next to Mitch.

When they were all sorted out, Blue said, taking over in that voice of his, "I guess we have some things to decide, but first I'd like to make myself clear. I don't go in for any crooked stuff. Ham, I don't want you to miss a tackle or do anything except play your best game. And if you have anything else in mind, then we all may as well go home right now."

For Mitch that was the tipoff. The conversation was being taped, and Blue wanted to sound like he was clean, while he roped Ham in and got Ham to suggest a bribe. Mitch had expected something along those lines, but he'd figured Blue to be a much smoother operator. Although with Ham, you didn't have to be smooth. Ham worked on heavyweight principles; anything under a ton or so didn't count.

It was pretty easy to read Blue, too. What he was after was, he was setting up a frame, because if the football Commissioner ever heard this tape, Ham would be through in professional football. So Blue could then blackmail him, and Ham would have to do whatever Blue told him to. Mess up a play. Leave a hole for a back to come through. Set up a penalty. Knock out an opposing back. Anything at all. And Ham could spell the difference between winning and losing, because he wasn't an all-league defensive guard for nothing.

Meanwhile Blue went ahead and made like the host offering drinks all around. Ham took a Scotch and soda, and Mitch settled for a beer.

"Just bring me a can," he said, on account he was taking no chances with getting a mickey slipped in his drink. "That's the way I like it. Glass, it spoils the taste."

"A connoisseur," Blue said. "A real connoisseur."

After that they horsed around a little, talking about

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the league and who had a chance of knocking off Ham's club. Stuff like that. Blue got into personalities and found out a few things, but nothing important. At first Mitch wasn't sure what the guy was after, but when the drinks came and the waiter put a whole bottle in front of Ham, Mitch caught onto that little trick.

The idea was simple—to get Ham drunk, just in case he was smart enough when sober to tumble to how he was getting suckered. Anyhow, Ham laid himself wide open and asked point-blank how much they'd pay him for you-know-what. Which maybe Ham thought was a way of putting it real cagey.

After a while Mitch couldn't help getting a pretty good idea of what the tape was going to sound like after it got listened to, edited, cut, spliced, and put together again. Around then, say by the time Ham was on his third or fourth drink and Blue was leading him along like he was getting rehearsed for a TV commercial, Mitch got to thinking things out.

Maybe it was Blue's voice, maybe the way he kept looking over at the bar where this Nate Brigham was, or maybe it was one of those hunches that you can't ever pin down, only you know they're right—anyhow, after a while Mitch knew that this guy wasn't Bluebird Yancy at all. He was just a stand-in.

Yancy's reasons for not coming weren't hard to figure out. If the tape showed Ham discussing a bribe with Yancy, then Yancy could be in trouble, too. But this way his voice wouldn't even be on the tape. and he could probably prove he'd been a few hundred miles away on the night the tape had been made.

Maybe Mitch should have walked out of here and gone home. Maybe he should have let Ham drown in his own soup. And certainly Mitch should have gone over to a phone, or tried to, and called headquarters and told them where he was and asked for help. Except that Ham was Amy's cousin and she wanted to do something for him, and she'd expect Mitch to take care of Ham. So Mitch had to do things on his own and in his own way, even if he was riding for a fall.

He kind of fidgeted around, like he was sitting on a splinter or something, until he had himself smack in the line of sight between Blue and Brigham, over at the bar. That way Blue couldn't get his signal across, and Mitch was safe for long enough to take his wallet out of his pocket, stick the thing down on the table with

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his identification in full view, and start talking.

"Let's level on this," he said. "I'm Taylor, Homicide, and what I came for was to get the goods on Bluebird Yancy. That's why I'm here and that's what Ham brought me here for. He's working with the police, and this bribery pitch—it's nothing but an act. Only it looks like you were too smart to fall for it, so let's have the tape and call it quits. Because you're not Yancy, and I know it."

You could tell that guy, whatever his name was, hadn't expected anything like this, and the idea of a cop scared him. So Mitch was all set to tell Ham to pick up Jerry Nick and spread him out on the table while Mitch located the tape. And it would have worked out that way, Ham and Mitch could have been there in the center of the room and on their way out before Brigham got wise. Except nothing got through into that big head of Ham's in less than five or ten minutes.

He looked blank and said to Mitch, "What are you trying to pull? I ought to throw you up against the wall and watch you bounce back, because you're queering the whole deal." And at the same time he grabbed Mitch and shook him with that big paw of his.

Still, Mitch made a stab at getting things back on the right track. "Amy told you, didn't she?" he said, figuring the magic of her name would stop Ham. Which it did, except it was too late. Because when Ham had grabbed the little guy, it gave Brigham a clear view of the booth and of Blue's S.O.S. signal. The result was, Brigham walked over, took his gun out, and stuck it against Mitch's spine.

It was a pretty smooth maneuver, too, because his body screened what was happening inside the booth, so nobody could see that gun of his, and he held his voice low.

"Keep your hands where they are," he said to Mitch. "I want your gun, so sit tight."

There was nothing much Mitch could do except wish Amy'd never had a cousin or that he'd never showed up or that he'd had enough sense to go along with Mitch right off the bat. Anyhow, Mitch let Nate take his gun. Then Mitch turned around and saw that nobody in the bar had noticed what was going on in the booth. And even if they had, nobody was going to come over and help him out.

You take a setup like this, with a couple of professional hoods ready to gun you down if they have to, and you don't mess around. You stall, and

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you hope for some kind of a break.

"Where's Yancy?" Mitch said, real innocent and speaking to Nate. "What happened to Bluebird Yancy?"

"Sitting right in front of you," Brigham said.

"Him?" Mitch said. "Who you kidding? He's no more Yancy than I'm the King of Siam."

"That's right," Blue said, real quick. "They paid me to play a part. I don't want trouble. I—"

Then a bunch of things happened all at once, including Nate Brigham getting sore and losing his head. Sort of snarling at Blue and telling him to shut up, Brigham swung his gun, with the barrel as a whip, and hit Blue in the jaw. Blue let out a howl, on account not just because he was hurt, but he was an actor and what good is an actor with a busted jaw?

At this moment Ham sort of came to, his mind began working pretty much the way it worked when a play was coming at him. Or maybe his mind wasn't working, but the result was about the same, because Ham went into action.

The table in front of Mitch seemed to lift up and hit the wall of the booth and knock it over, along with everybody else. Only the booth kept on going and hit the wall of the room and stove part of it in. There must have been some electrical wiring in there that shorted, because suddenly the lights went out. Some dame back there at the bar started screaming, and somebody heaved a bottle for no reason except when things get rough in a bar somebody always heaves a bottle.

For a second or two Mitch was kind of left alone. Blue and Jerry Nick and Brigham were all off balance, what with Ham's charge. So Mitch hooked the nearest leg, which turned out to be Brigham's. Brigham went down, and Mitch socked him, got a knee in Brigham's face, and grabbed at his hand. It had a gun in it, so Mitch banged down the wrist and kept banging until the hand let go of the gun.

You don't exactly think when you're in a spot like that, but in the back of his mind Mitch had a couple of things he wanted to get hold of. First off, there was his own gun, and second, he wanted that tape.

The gun business was easy, on account he now had the drop on Brigham, and he located the tape with that pocket flashlight he always carried with him. He switched the light on and spotted the dispatch case that must have had the tape recorder in it. Everybody else seemed busy untangling themselves, and

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what with there being no regular light, nobody even saw Mitch pick up the case. Once he had it, it was easy to get Ham to dust out of the joint along with him.

They found a cab about a block away and got inside and Mitch told the driver to go to the airport. Then Mitch went to work on Ham.

"You jackass!" he said. "You know what you got yourself into? They framed you. Every time you opened your big mouth and said you wanted dough and that you'd help them out any way you could, it got taped. They could blackmail you for the rest of your life. And the tape's right here, in this case. So when you hole up somewheres, and it better be a long ways from here, you can turn it on and listen to yourself. Then you can think about what would have happened if somebody went to the football commissioner and told them about this tape."

"I could explain it," Ham said, but Mitch didn't bother waiting for any half-baked excuses.

"Consorting with known gamblers," Mitch said. "And with Yancy's hoods. Beginning to see the picture?"

"I guess so," Ham said weakly.

"So what you're going to do when we get to the airport," Mitch said, "is take the first plane out. Anywheres. Just get out of town and out of the state. In the morning you can fly any place you want to, except here. If you're lucky, nobody's going to know about tonight. Because if it ever comes out, you're through, finished, kaput. Understand?"

Ham did. And he paid the cab fare out to the airport, and prepaid it back to Mitch's apartment, where Amy was waiting up.

"Where's Ham?" she said. "Isn't he with you?"

"He had some business somewheres else," Mitch said, "and he had to beat it."

"Why? Where?"

"I don't know where," Mitch said, "but he got in a kind of a jam and had to take off."

"Wouldn't you help him?"

"Oh, sure. I did all I could."

"I'm glad of that. Because, while he was a nuisance, he's still my cousin and he's still wonderful, isn't he?"

"Well," Mitch said cautiously, "he's something all right."

So everything was fine with Amy, but he ran into a little trouble with the lieutenant next morning, when Decker called him into that cubbyhole of an office of his.

"How did that business with Ham Burney work out?"

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"Well," Mitch said, "he was supposed to meet Bluebird Yancy. Remember?"

"Did he?"

"No. Yancy never showed."

"It wouldn't have anything to do with an actor named Travis Stanley, would it? He's in the hospital with a broken jaw and he says somebody hit him, only he won't say who."

"Anybody get arrested?" Mitch asked.

"Some dame did, for throwing a bottle and starting a ruckus. Burney was there all right, but the precinct is handling the case and they haven't called us in. In case they do I ought to know what the score is."

"This Burney," Mitch said, playing it close to the chest, "they wanted to get some bribery evidence on him."

"Did they?"

Mitch shook his head. "No. It didn't work out."

"Anything else?"

"It's kind of a family matter," Mitch said, "so if nobody's going to prefer charges and if nobody got hurt except this actor guy, then that's the whole ball game. It's all over."

The lieutenant didn't like it. He was the commanding officer here. He had a right to know what his men were doing, and their duty was to report to him, and in full. So Mitch tried to smooth things over a little.

"You were right about the tape," he said.

The lieutenant didn't say anything, and after a while Mitch got up, kind of looked around, then walked out.

He was in the doghouse all right, but what of it? Because you take a guy like Ham, raking in the big dough and being famous and all that, and what did he have? Not much. And while Mitch didn't exactly have everything in the world and wasn't making big dough, he was doing all right. In fact, if you wanted to sit down and think about it, it looked like he was in pretty good shape, what with Amy and the kids and a good job and a regular paycheck.

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a *NEW* short story by

JOYCE HARRINGTON

Another regional tale by Joyce Harrington, a type of story for which she has a special touch . . .

When your Editor was a country boy, he used to go to the brown October hills to gather brown nuggets—walnuts, filberts, hickories, butternuts; but no trip your Editor ever took was quite like the one you are now going to read about . . .

THE GREEN PATCH

by JOYCE HARRINGTON

Emmeline used to be pretty. She's not any more. I don't mind that so much. I guess I've changed a bit, too. Emmeline used to have the softest, sweetest voice. But that was long ago. When she talked it was like listening to the love-mumble of nesting turtledoves. The only thing is she never stopped. She'd just go on and on in that soft, sweet voice, until finally I guess I just stopped listening.

I don't know where she found so much to talk about—there's not that much that happens on a farm. But for as long as I can remember, Emmeline never closed her yap. The boys grew up and left home without ever getting a word in edgewise.

Somewhere along the way Emmeline's voice changed. I don't know whether voices ever get stripped like gears or rusty like the hinges on that old five-bar gate, but Emmeline's voice started getting loud and kind of shrieky. I didn't notice it at first because that was about the time I started getting a little hard of hearing. Or maybe I just got better at tuning her out.

What I did notice was that every time she'd come out to the barn with her lip flapping a mile a minute, the cows would get all fidgety and the dogs would slink away with their tails down. Then I'd have to talk some to the cows and soothen them down. It

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was always a pleasure to talk to the cows. When they had something to say, they said it and that was that. The rest of the time they stood around and chewed and twitched their tails. They don't expect you to say very much to them, either. A conversation with a cow is a very restful thing.

Well, Emmeline got the notion that I was turning stone-deaf on her and insisted that I see about getting a hearing aid. She didn't want me to miss a word of what she had to say.

The way it happened was this. We always go to the county fair, and usually I come home with a few prizes. That particular year I was showing some Spotted Poland China hogs and sows and hopeful of a ribbon or two, and Emmeline had entered her giant zucchini and some of her mixed corn and bean relish. It was opening day and we'd just got finished registering and getting the livestock into their pens and Emmeline's entries labeled and onto the proper shelves. Emmeline didn't want to miss the ostrich races, so we were hurrying down the lane between the tractor exhibit and the rabbit hutches.

Emmeline said later that everybody started shouting and warning us to get out of the way, but I never heard a thing. I was too busy not listening to Emmeline's running commentary on everything from the shamelessness of the young girls in shorts and halters (they looked pretty good to me) to Miss Cass Waterman competing in the tobacco-spitting event (Miss Cass was the county's unofficial arm-wrestling champ, too). So naturally I didn't hear a thing, and the next thing I knew Emmeline was scooting away from my side like I had a hide full of ticks, and then I was flat on my face in the dirt choking for air and numb all over.

Ever been run over by a Sherman tank? Well, that's about the way it is to be plowed by an ostrich with a hot tail. The way they told it was, some boys—it's always "some boys," ain't it?—some boys had decided it would be pretty good fun to lob some firecrackers into the ostrich pen and see what would happen. What happened was that one old bird's tail feathers got singed and he leaped over the railings and lit out for home sweet home. I just happened to be moseying along between him and Timbuktu or wherever. The next day I was black and blue and purple and green from the back of my neck to the end of my B.V.D.'s and couldn't even show up to collect my blue ribbons on Myrtle and Henry.

Well, Emmeline reasoned that since I couldn't hear well enough

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to get out of the way of a singed ostrich with a whole crowd of people roaring at me, then I couldn't hear much of what she was directing my way, so I was in dire need of a hearing aid. I got one.

And that was the best thing I ever did for myself. For one thing, I found out that Emmeline had been screeching at me for years. What I'd taken for the cooing of a turtledove was more like the cry of a hurt jackass. I also found out that I could turn the thing off when Emmeline was around, so I wasn't any more troubled by her noise than I was before.

But when I went out of an early morning with my deer rifle under my arm and the dogs snuffling along beside me, why, then I could turn that little contraption up loud and hear things I'd forgotten there were in the world to hear. All the rustling and chirping and carrying on in amongst the trees and thickets. Squirrels, of course. They don't mind who hears their chitter-chat. But all the other creatures, too. Brown owls, if I was early enough, and foxes barking to each other across the hills.

Sometimes I would hear wings flapping and then I'd see some old turkey buzzard climbing up the sky and gliding across the treetops looking for something good to pounce on. Once I thought I heard a loon—there used to be loons down at Coldwater Lake when I was a boy, but I only heard it once and never again. I'd swear I could even hear the underground workers, moles and badgers and such burrowing away in the earth.

Well. I guess the point of all this nature rambling is that, thanks to Emmeline and the hearing aid I was spending more and more time out in the woods and less and less time at home not listening to her. When I was at home I kept the hearing aid turned off. Sometimes I wondered if Emmeline went on talking whether there was anybody around to hear her or not. I didn't particularly want to find out.

I never shot anything when I was out in the woods. I always had the deer rifle along, and once in a while I'd see antlers moving stately through the trees or a white-tailed doe frisking down a hillside. But I'd just let them go about their business. They had more right to the forest than I did.

I've never been much of a hunter and the rifle was more or less to give me an excuse in case I ran into other hunters. I wouldn't want them to think I was crazy or sissified, doing nothing more than walking through the woods listening and looking. But I al-

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ways kept the rifle clean and oiled and loaded.

There was a place in the woods I came to regard as my own private retreat. I found it one morning when I was following some fox scats just to see if I could track the fox to its lair. The dogs were looping back and forth across the trail and I was ambling along slow and easy, taking note of interesting things along the way. I heard running water up ahead. I had the hearing aid turned way up and the rushing of that water sounded louder than anything else in the forest.

I headed straight toward it, and the dogs ran on in front. I guess they were thirsty. I came out then into a clearing where the trees stood back from a little stream and the onion grass grew right down to its bank. There was an outcropping of flat stones and just beyond them the stream widened out into a clear still pool. On the other side of the pool the trees clustered thickly and the bank was shady and slick with green moss.

I waded across the ankle-deep stream just above the pool and clambered out on the opposite bank. The dogs stayed behind, looking puzzled and anxious, and it's just as well they did. I took a few steps downstream toward the pool, peering into the woods as I went. There were shagbark hickory and further back what looked to me like black walnut. I was thinking that I might pick up a few nuts to take home. I didn't think very far along that track, because I noticed that the ground was kind of soft and squishy underfoot.

I looked down and realized that with every step I took, my boots were sinking deeper into a greenish slime that I had mistook for moss. I backed off pretty quick until I hit firmer ground above the pool. And then I took another hard look at that patch of green. It quivered in the dim yellow light and there was nary a sign of footprints where I had been standing.

Quicksand? With green pond scum overlaying it?

I picked up a rock and tossed it smack into the middle of the green patch. It sank instantly, its passing marked by a single green bubble that rose and burst with a sigh. I tried it again with a branch. This time the branch lay jiggling slightly for a minute or so. Then it gradually slipped beneath the surface. There were no bubbles.

I skedaddled back across the stream to where the dogs were waiting. I sat on a flat rock in the sun and chewed onion grass and mulled things over. The dogs went to sleep. It was peaceful

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there, quiet and not quiet. The forest buzzed and hummed a drowsy background and the stream gurgled and splashed into the pool. I felt as if I could spend the rest of my life there.

Come to think of it, the rest of my life could happen any day now. I was creeping up on my three score and ten, and had gradually given up the hard work of farming over the past few years. Oh, I still kept some acres in soybeans, but I had a hired man to do the heavy work. I tended the hogs and cows myself, but only about a fourth as many as I used to keep. Emmeline ran some chickens and pottered about in her kitchen garden.

It was enough to keep us going and there was money in the bank to buy a few luxuries from time to time. If we ever had an emergency, there was acreage to sell. The farm had done well for us, and all I really wanted was to spend my last years in peace and quiet. With miles of forest practically at my doorstep and the hearing aid to help turn Emmeline off, it didn't seem like an impossible dream.

Well, I took to heading straight for that clearing every morning as soon as the chores were done. The bright fall days in the forest turned from green to amber to orange and blood-red while I sat on the flat rock and listened to the changing seasons. I never crossed the stream again, but I could see the quivering green patch from where I sat. Every once in a while a hickory nut would drop from one of the surrounding trees right into that sickly green and disappear. The green patch would bubble and sigh and that would be the end of it.

One morning I was sitting at the kitchen table finishing off a plate of fried mush and nodding my head at what I hoped were the right places in Emmeline's jawboning. I had my hearing aid turned off, but I could see her lips moving and hear a soft mellow chirping coming from her direction. I wasn't concentrating or I might have made out a word or two and realized what she was up to. But that was the whole point of the hearing aid. Not to hear her ranting. And I was thinking about being three miles away in the forest, sitting on my flat rock.

So I was completely taken by surprise when she leaped up from her chair, skittered around the table, and snatched the little control box from my shirt pocket. I tried to grab it from her but she held tight and I didn't want it to get broken. Then her voice came through, loud and clear.

"I thought so," she squawked. "That's just about the meanest

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thing you've ever done. Sitting there all these months with this thing turned off. How do you think I feel, talking my fool head off and you not hearing a word of it? How do you think I've felt all these years with nobody but you and the chickens to talk to, and all I ever get from you is a nod and a grunt? Don't you think I've worried and fretted about you? I thought you'd gone completely and totally stone-eared deaf. How would you like it if . . . ?"

And so on and on. Emmeline was never at a loss for words. While she was putting all her energy into speechmaking, I calmly took the control box from her hand and stuffed it back into my shirt pocket. Then I walked out of the house, stopping only long enough to pick up my deer rifle and whistle for the dogs, and didn't stop walking until I reached the clearing. I stayed there all day, until the evening chill set in and I realized I was hungry and the cows needed milking.

Emmeline was waiting at the door for me. Right off she reached for my pocket and checked the control box. It was turned on. Then she started in.

"Where've you been all day? How would you like it if I just took off one morning and never showed up until sundown?"

Well, I wouldn't mind it a bit, but I didn't tell her that. I just listened. I took off my boots and put on my carpet slippers while she gabbled more of the same. Over supper she changed her tune a little bit, but didn't let up on the cackle. Instead, she started complaining about our neighbor down the line, old Emerson Polk.

". . . and do you know what he's done? He's cut them all down and sold them off for timber. What do you think of that?"

"They're his trees."

"Well, sure they are. But I've been going over there for years and years gathering nuts. You know how much you like black-walnut cake. He never bothered to pick up the nuts. If I didn't take them, the squirrels would've. Now there's nothing left but stumps. I think it's a crying shame to cut down those beautiful trees. And where am I going to find any black walnuts this year?"

I said what I said next without even thinking about it. It just came out of my mouth so easy and smooth like cream flowing out of the separator.

I said, "I know where there are some black walnuts. Hickories, too. I'll take you there in the morning."

Later that night, after I'd taken out the hearing aid and put on my nightshirt, I lay in the bed and wondered a little bit about

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what I could be meaning by offering to take Emmeline to the clearing. I closed my eyes and saw slimy green patches against my eyelids. Then I went to sleep.

The next morning I started out as usual, with the deer rifle under my arm and the dogs mooching along fore and aft. But with this difference. Emmeline was chattering at my side. She made sure my hearing aid was turned up and felt called upon to comment on every blessed thing along the way.

When we passed the north end of the soybean field, she said as how the beans were still a tad green but ought to be ready for harvesting in maybe a week or so. I could see that for myself and didn't need her to tell me my business. When we entered the woods, she kept ooohing and aaahing over the fall colors and wondering if there could be snakes hiding under the piles of leaves on the ground. Pretty soon she started complaining and asking how much further.

"I just got to rest a minute. I ain't as young as I used to be."

So we stopped to rest, but the one thing she never rested was her mouth. On and on it went, and it never occurred to her to shut up and listen to what was going on all around us. Even with my hearing aid turned way up, I couldn't hear the usual shy pattering, the hoots and whistles and creakings and rustlings. All I could hear was Emmeline's voice overriding everything else and scaring away every living thing for miles around.

I began to wonder if I was doing the right thing by taking her to my clearing. I'd probably never be able to return to it again, not with the echo of her screech rolling around in it forever. And I still wasn't quite sure what was going to happen once we got there. I knew what I would like to happen, but I didn't know if I could bring myself to do it, or if I would chicken out at the last minute. Probably I wouldn't come anywhere near doing it, and we'd just pick up a few nuts and come on home. And I'd spend the rest of my life, however long that might be, listening to Emmeline with the hearing aid on high so I wouldn't miss a word.

"How much further is it? If I'd known it was so far, I never would have let you drag me out here. Isn't there some way we could have drove? Oh, shoo! There goes one of them pesky blacksnakes. Are you sure there ain't any rattlers out here?"

We came to the clearing and it seemed smaller somehow with Emmeline in it. It filled up with her racket, and the little stream seemed cloudy and sluggish, barely gurgling at all.

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"Phew! Just smell that onion grass. I never could abide onion grass. Well, if this ain't the dreariest little wide spot in the woods I ever did see. Them nuts better turn up soon or I'm going home."

I pointed out the hickories just across the stream and told her the black walnuts were just beyond. She sat down on my flat rock to take her shoes off, complaining all the while about how it wasn't worth the effort and from here on she'd buy her black walnuts at the store.

We finally got across the stream and I told her to go on ahead while I scouted around to see if there were any more hickories or black walnuts upstream. She set off towards the trees with her burlap poke hanging from her hand. The green patch lay in shadow and looked as innocent as a field of sweet clover.

I still didn't know what would happen. Whether she would notice the green patch and just walk around it. Or whether she would step into it and I would pull her out at the last minute. Or whether she would just disappear from sight and sound and the green patch would bubble and sigh. I just plain didn't know.

But then she started yapping.

"Bet I know what you been doing all these days. You been coming out here, haven't you? Coming out here and playing Davy Crockett. How come you don't have you a coonskin cap? I believe you're in your second childhood. An old coot like you playing kid games. Well, I don't think you better come here any more. I don't like it. It's creepy and it's too far away from the house. What if you broke a leg or got bit by a snake? Ugh, this ground is all mushy."

Well, I thought, she always wanted to have the last word. This might as well be it.

First I took out the control box and turned it all the way down. Then I raised my deer rifle and took careful aim. She was right at the edge of the green patch. I wasn't what you would call a crack shot, but whether I hit her or not the noise ought to startle her right into the middle of it.

Through the sights I saw her turn her head first to one side and then to the other, like she was listening to something. Then she started running at me. I was so flabbergasted I lowered the rifle. Nobody in their right mind runs right into the barrel of a loaded rifle. I could see that she was yelling and carrying on, but I couldn't hear a word of it. Then all of a sudden she swerved off to one side and started waving her arms and pointing behind me.

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I turned around and looked where she was pointing. If I'd had the hearing aid turned up, I might have heard it. But then again I might not. Not with Emmeline running off at the mouth like she'd been doing. It was coming right at me with its rattles going like a threshing machine and its fangs as big as pitchforks. It was almost too close for me to get a shot at it with the rifle.

I backed off a bit, nice and easy, and the snake slid along the ground, its mean-looking head pointing straight at me. It was the great-granddaddy of all rattlers, and at that moment I would gladly have listened to ten years of Emmeline's mouth music for a chance to be somewheres else. I kept backing off until I saw that booger draw itself up ready to strike. Then I quick raised the rifle and blasted.

Well, like I said, I never did much shooting, and that must have been a lucky shot. It was pretty close range, and I got him right in the mouth. Blew his head clean off. Only thing is, I forgot to make allowance for the recoil.

It knocked me backwards, right on my rump, and the gun went flying out of my hands. It was a real funny feeling, setting down hard like that on ground that gave way beneath me. Before I knew what was going on, my legs were under and I was up to my waist in the green patch. It felt like putting on a pair of long johns that had shrunk in the wash. Only cold and wet.

Emmeline came flapping up to the edge of the patch, her mouth going like sixty. I couldn't hear a word she was saying. She picked up the rifle and shook it at me. She looked mad and scared both, but just a tad madder than she was scared. I guess she figured out what I had in mind, and even though I couldn't make out what she was yapping about, I had a pretty good idea. I never was too sure I could make my plan work out, but I didn't ever calculate it would end up like this.

After a minute or so she give up screeching at me and sashayed back across the stream. I was up to my chest in the green patch, and having just a mite of trouble getting my breath in and out.

Right now she's setting over there on my flat rock, and the dogs are sleeping in their usual place in the sun. She's pointing the rifle at me and I can see her lips moving. I sure would like to be able to hear the forest sounds one more time before I go under. But even if I could reach the control box to turn it up, I wouldn't do it. It's peaceful and quiet in the clearing, and I want it to stay that way until the last bubble and sigh.

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Here are some excerpts from the author's letter accompanying "Force of Habit"—Mrs. Helen Patrick speaking:

"Nearing my 74th birthday, I am an old gal attempting to resuscitate what I like to think was a budding literary career—40 years ago."

(What editor could resist such an opening line?)

Then Mrs. Patrick recalls some of the periodicals she once contributed to—"Sweetheart Stories," "People's Home Journal," "The Rexall Magazine," "Babies—Just Babies" (Eleanor Roosevelt was a co-editor)—all, alas, no longer with us. . .

"So what stopped me—way back then? Just the pressures of everyday living, I suppose. It was much easier for me to write when my children were very small. . .After they were all grown up and through college and establishing careers and homes of their own, my husband retired—and we both just loafed. When he died three years ago the children had a private conference. . .they told me they thought I should try to do some writing again. . ."

Imagine—going back to writing at 74—what an inspiration to every writer young and old. . .

FORCE OF HABIT

by HELEN PATRICK

Old Mr. Henderson's daily walk down Main Street was always a pleasant experience. He received so many cheery greetings from good friends. Eyes twinkling, he would lift a hand in answer to salutations or, more frequently, clasp his hands together in the universal hail sign of the deaf mute. Midville citizens always smiled when they saw him do that. They understood Mr. Henderson.

He liked to conjecture on the activities of the small town's citizens. This morning when he saw Bill Johnson coming out of the telephone office he thought Bill was probably asking to have the phone connected out at Senator Lake's summer

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cabin. Or perhaps paying for the service if it had already been done. Bill was the Lakes' glorified handyman and Mr. Henderson had read in the *Gazette* last evening that he was in town to get the cabin ready for the Senator's family because they'd soon be coming down from the capital for the summer.

Mr. Henderson made sure his pencil and pad of paper were in his pocket. He liked the stop at Tony's fruit and vegetable stall best of all his morning visits because he could use his fingers talking to Tony. Well, up to a certain point—then he had to write what he wanted to say. That point was when he started to tell Tony about certain pictures showing at the Granada, the little movie house across from Tony's market.

Tony had long relied on Mr. Henderson's judgment of films, so each week when the picture changed Mr. Henderson went to see it and reported to Tony. If he liked it he didn't mind telling about it with his fingers. Otherwise—well, Sam Briggs, who owned the Granada, was always out front puttering around in the mornings and it didn't seem very nice to spell out unkind things about Sam's pictures right under his nose, even if Sam couldn't read the fingers.

And today he hadn't anything good to say about the gangster film that Sam was featuring. Private citizens didn't go around capturing bandits and all that kind of stuff. The police had a hard enough time doing it.

Sam was out front, right enough, mopping the lobby floor. A youngish-looking man with heavy shoulders and a thick bullneck was inspecting the Granada's gaudy posters. A car pulled up in front of the theater. The driver, a thin young man with a reckless mouth, just sat there, letting the motor idle.

Tony, tying scarlet radishes and pungent green onions into bunches, glanced up and nodded as Mr. Henderson's fingers flashed a message. From the bank next door to the Granada came Neva Barnes, the stenographer, and young Jim Lucas, the assistant cashier, on their way to lunch. Mr. Henderson, seeing Tony nod to them, turned and waved.

This would be a good time to have a little visit with Mr. Bowen, the cashier, who would not be very busy just now; so Mr. Henderson reached for his pad and pencil and hurried to write his report for Tony.

With a last swipe of his mop Sam Briggs disappeared into the theater and Tony went into

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the leanto back of his stall for another supply of produce. The bullnecked individual ambled down the street and into the bank. Noon in the town of Midville had swept this section of the street clean of other life. Well, not exactly. Mr. Henderson, just finishing his caustic movie report, felt a hard object prodding his ribs. He lifted startled eyes to meet the gaze of the reckless-mouthed young man from the car.

The young man's lips moved with clipped precision. "Get going, Grandpappy—right over and into the back seat."

Mr. Henderson didn't need to hear the words. That prodding was sufficient. He walked in the direction indicated. The bullnecked one emerged from the bank, one hand clutching a large brown-paper sack, the other holding a duplicate of the thing pressing Mr. Henderson's ribs.

Then they were in the car which lurched forward on screeching tires. Not until they were on the highway did the bullnecked one turn toward the driver, and Mr. Henderson, hunched on the back seat, watched vitriolic words spatter from the corner of his mouth.

Well, Mr. Henderson supposed the reckless-mouthed one had a valid excuse. Mr. Henderson had seen them and could identify them. So now what were they going to do with him? He thought of the sheriff. Surely he'd be in speedy pursuit with his deputy—maybe with some state cops. They'd take it for granted the bandits would take the highway toward the capital. But they would be wrong. A mile out of town the driver slackened speed and headed the car down a side road that passed the Lakes' summer cabin.

Now what were they up to, Mr. Henderson wondered. A word kept niggling around in the back of his mind. What was it? Oh, yes—inept. They were an inept pair of bank robbers. Amateurish, that's what they were. And what was that other word from gangster parlance? Case, that was it. They hadn't cased this job too well—certainly not this part of it. They didn't know the locality.

Coming up was a bridge over a little creek and the road turned off the bridge at nearly a right angle, then ran for a short distance right along the creek. They'll never make it, Mr. Henderson thought. And they didn't. The car came out of the turn lurching from side to side on the narrow road, then just quietly slid over a low bank and came to rest in the shallow creek.

They'd have a sweet time

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getting out of this mess. The bottom of that creek was inches of sheer mud. But it seemed they didn't mean to try. They got out of the car and yanked Mr. Henderson from the back seat and up to the grassy bank.

A hurried conference followed during which the bullnecked one gestured toward the Lakes's cabin on a gentle rise not far down the creek. Mr. Henderson noted that Bill Johnson hadn't as yet had time to unboard the windows. The place looked deserted.

The younger bandit nudged Mr. Henderson to gain attention and pretended to write on one palm with the forefinger of the other hand. Mr. Henderson produced his pad and pencil.

"What does this road connect with?" was the question handed to Mr. Henderson.

"Road 67 parallel with the highway," answered Mr. Henderson's wavering script.

"Get you to the city?" penciled the bandit.

"Longer but gets you there," wrote Mr. Henderson.

More hurried words between the robbers. Then the reckless-mouthed one handed the pad and pencil back to Mr. Henderson and hurried away. Grasping the brown-paper bag, the bullnecked one motioned Mr. Henderson to walk before

Bill Johnson was getting a little bit careless, Mr. Henderson thought. He'd left the back door unlocked but at least that made it simpler to get inside and find a place to rest. Mr. Henderson dropped wearily into an easy chair in Senator Lake's study.

The other paced nervously up and down for a time and then pretended, as the younger one had, to write on his palm. Once more Mr. Henderson produced his pad and pencil. He glanced indifferently at the black lines scrawling their message across the paper. "My partner went to get wheels. I'm having a look around. Stay put—*or else*!"

When his jailer had gone, Mr. Henderson leaned back in his chair and closed his eyes. Warmth, like a gentle finger on his lids, aroused him. A shaft of sunlight squeezed through a knothole in a window board. It ran across the room, dust motes dancing in its brightness, straight toward the telephone on the Senator's desk.

Mr. Henderson sat very still, remembering Bill Johnson coming out of the telephone office, thinking of an instrument like this on the desk in the sheriff's office. Telephones, Mr. Henderson mused, can be very wonderful things—for people who can talk . . .

After a while the bullnecked

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one came back and resumed his nervous pacing.

They had been very careful, very quiet, but suddenly they were there. The room seemed filled with stern-faced men, guns in hand. The sheriff was there, with his deputy. There were a couple of state cops and there was Bill Johnson. The bullnecked bank robber was outnumbered—and certainly very surprised.

Mr. Henderson was given the honor of carrying the bank's money to the sheriff's car which had been parked, along with the highway-patrol car, down the road and out of sight of the cabin. The deputy shoved the bullnecked one, now securely manacled, into the back seat.

Seated beside the sheriff, Mr. Henderson thought that it wasn't over yet. The state troopers had stayed behind with Bill Johnson to apprehend the other bandit on his return. And he mused, with a little smile, that maybe he'd better tell Tony that wasn't such a bad movie at the Granada after all. Truer to life than he had thought.

"Just drop me off at Tony's market, will you, Tim?"

"Sure thing, Mr. Henderson," the sheriff replied. "You and Tony are great friends, huh?"

Mr. Henderson nodded. "Tony is a good boy," he replied. "One of the best students I had in all those years I taught at the school for mutes."

"Q"

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a crime short story by

JANET GREEN

first publication in the United States

It is nearly twenty years since we published Janet Green's "The Tallest Man in the World"—a haunting story that gave you an intimate glimpse behind the scenes of European theatrical life. Now we offer another of Janet Green's stories about, in this instance, English show biz . . . Certain backgrounds never seem to lose their fascination, their glitter and glamor. For example, the circus: there's something about it, something that is, as Janet Green's theatrical agent says, "magic all the way" . . .

THE MOST TATTOOED MAN IN THE WORLD

by JANET GREEN

The bell sounded urgent, insistent, the way only a telephone bell sounds at two o'clock in the morning. I lifted the receiver. Papa Gaudin was calling from Amsterdam. The Great Reinheimer's ulcer had finally killed him, and with a cat man there is never an understudy. Papa had lost his cat act.

I sat up, fully awake now. This was my business as well as his. It had taken me three years to persuade the old gentleman to bring his circus across the Channel. He had no regard for English audiences. He said that his kind of entertainment belonged on the Continent. But he knew, and I knew, that the truth was he spoke no English, and felt too old to learn.

It was clear to me that if I did not move quickly he would ask me to put in another circus. An aqua-show, an ice show, anything. I said I knew a cat man who was free, and when I cradled the receiver I knew I had to find one.

The problem stayed with me

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and would not let me sleep. I thought coffee might help. I make coffee carefully, slowly. Before the kettle boiled, I recalled a fellow I'd seen in Los Angeles two springs before, a young man with a lot of talent, panache, and no money to buy his own cats. He could step right into the Great Reinheimer's white kid boots and work the act as it stood.

At once I put in a person-to-person call. I chased it through the next two days, then ran him down across the Mexican border, tenting in Ensenata. I was in luck. The end of his engagement was in sight, he said, and he'd be glad to fly to Amsterdam.

After he'd hung up, I sat for a moment. His voice, throaty, vibrant, young, was playing on a memory. Then the picture slipped from the filing cabinet that I call my mind and I saw Jules. I saw how he looked, heard how he sounded. And remembered how I loved him.

I walked the park. Now that I had remembered, I wanted to forget. Quickly. Jules was the best cat man I ever saw, the bravest, the most beautiful, till a snow-leopard clawed his face in love and tore away his beauty. I was the first to see him after it and I went straight out.

Jules was proud. When they took the bandages off, and he saw the result of the Judas Kiss, he disappeared. Plastic surgery can't do much for the deep caress of a passionate leopard's paw.

It happens all the time in my business. They just drop away: the flyer who falls, the knife thrower whose arthritic knuckles betray his eye, the bareback rider who breaks her spine, the crocodile woman who looks on the fangs with fear and has to stop, the actor who can hold the words no longer. And the dwarf who dies. Dwarfs do not make old bones. Only clowns last. Look at Carko, 75 this year, and I have him with the Reislings at a top figure. My father was booking that shriveled old gentleman when I was small enough to run under the horses' bellies and shorter than the shortest dwarf.

I sighed. None of these thoughts ousted Jules. Then I told myself I would think of him as he had been and not as he became. Does he wear a mask? I wondered. Or does he wait for the night and then walk? It was no use. I could only remember the last I saw.

The American from Ensenata, tall and sandy, planed the Atlantic three days later. I met him at the airport and liked him. He was big, broad, ebullient. A good showman. But

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tense underneath, the way a cat man should be.

We flew to Amsterdam together and met the cats in the pewter-colored light of early morning. You'd have thought he was related, the way those sleepy majestic beasts took to him. He had the touch, the flair, like Jules. I pushed the thought away, saw Papa Gaudin embrace the boy, and knew the London season was safe. My heart lightened. I collect the ten percent, and it's never enough in my business. Expenses are so high.

The three of us left the empty tent together. Then I saw that there had been a fourth and he was leaving just ahead. A tall broad man who wore a heavy German topcoat. I've often thought that topcoats give a distinctive national stamp to a man. My English ulster gives me away everywhere I go. It's good tweed and I've had it years. This fellow walking in front of me was a German. I was sure of that.

Christmas came fast. For me it's always the busiest time of the year. I had artistes up and down the country, and most nights I slept in a train. But I made the Olympic for Papa Gaudin's opening.

That night he took the ring himself, splendid in a silk hat, white tie, red tails, and the tall traditional whip firm in his right hand. Speed. I never saw anything like it. Yet nothing overlapped. That's the secret of being a good ringmaster. Marry the acts without a second's wait, and back it all with a showy brass band that plays music, not just noise.

I sat and basked in the atmosphere. There's something about a circus audience. I suppose it's the kids. But it acts on me like a walk in front of the sea. And the circus itself. I love it all. The liberty horses, Indian flame eaters, Chinese tumblers, clowns, elephants at the end of the first half, the trapeze high up. And clowns again. And again. Magic all the way.

Now young Jacko was in the ring with his twelve entrancing ponies. What would the Education Authorities say if they knew he was only ten years old? I shrugged. They wouldn't believe it. Young Jacko's as good as his old man, Captain Jack. My father found him in Prague. He spoke no English, nothing but his native tongue, but when he died he knew twelve languages.

The atmosphere changed, tensed. The finale had come. Rapidly the riggers formed the big cage in the center ring. The cowboy with his lasso came to one side. The quiet man with the gun to the other. Then hap-

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pened the sudden moment of darkness, the fine dull sounding call on the trumpets, and then the center arena full of lights to reveal the cat man dressed in the traditional costume of the Ruritanian Captain of Hussars, with gun in one hand and whip in the other.

I stared. Sweated. Remembered. He was Jules, big, quiet, magnificent. My eyelids pricked. I shook my head. Jules was gone. This was the sandy American I had brought from Ensenata in old Mexico.

The atmosphere changed again. Heightened. The big thrill was here. The cats were coming, two black jaguars from the Equator, three black panthers from Sumatra, three spotted jaguars from Colombia, four North American pumas, three tigers, six lions and lionesses. And the snow-leopard.

To the syncopation of snapping jaws, throaty, snarling roarings, and flying claws, the American guided the varied felines to their pedestals, then turned his back and crossed the cage.

Now handing the whip through the bars he quickly followed with the gun, then unbuttoned his tunic, threw it from him, pulled off his white silk shirt, and stood. Glistening.

Jules again. Naked to the waist amid a collection of cats that hated each other, and one snow-leopard, whose love could change a man's face from beauty into beefsteak.

I watched the act coldly. The sandy boy was good. He worked well with the snow-leopard. But I knew he would not perform the Judas Kiss. Papa Gaudin cut it from the act after Jules went. There's no time, you see. No time at all. If anything goes wrong, what is it? A gasp. A sigh. And in the moment that it takes the first customer to scream, a career is out, a cat man is finished, and a freak begun.

I shivered. When did it happen? How long ago? Five years? No—six. And the place? Köln on the Rhine. I got up suddenly. I could not watch the American. Jules was too strong in my memory.

I left the circus and strolled along the midway between the booths. As usual the concession was sublet and the lane was packed. It was grubby with discarded litter, raucous, and alive with human enjoyment. Bright unshielded lights illuminated red, yellow, and green painted posters specially designed to tickle the original sin in all of us. They brought even my jaded head around.

I watched the people, the customers, flooding to rubberneck

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the fat lady, the dwarf, the double-jointed man, to buy the pink clouds of candy floss, try for the packet of cigarettes at the rifle range, and risk their luck with the new number game. I stopped to see how this last one worked, twigged the gimmick at once, and laughed at their audacity. It was plain the two lads hadn't worked it for long, but they'd made a good start.

Next door the bearded lady had drawn her quota of gawpers. The last sniggering group was going in and just before the curtains closed, I saw her and wished I'd had a warning. By and large freaks are conceited, arrogant, dirty, believing themselves entitled to special regard in man's esteem.

I'd seen this one completely. I'd marked the low-cut sequined gown showing thin white shoulders and the silky dark beard that fell to the tight canyon between her breasts. I shuddered. I felt the goose flesh on my arms. My father used to tell me I'd have to find some armor against these dislikes, but I never have. I've tried.

I've drawn ten percent before now on a fellow who swallowed live wriggling fish, I've even brought a dozen giraffe-necked women across two continents. Rancid, those. They smell of stale oil. But I've never touched a geek, although I do a certain amount of business in the States. Never could, never will. They bite the heads off chickens for a bottle a day. Blood. Feathers. Mustn't think about it.

I dropped the iron curtain and crossed abruptly to the opposite booth. Automatically my eyes registered the words: *Ulric, The Most Tattooed Man in the World.* I relaxed. This wouldn't bother me. Underneath the tattoo marks I knew he'd be normal, with the right amount of fingers and toes.

More with a sense of retreat than anticipation, I entered the booth. It was small, smelly, and stuffy. Standing among the tight press of people at the back, I watched Ulric, The Most Tattooed Man in the World, coming to the end of his act, his show, his performance, whatever he styled it. Really he did nothing.

He just stood there, tall and rainbow-hued, clad only in the briefest loincloth, flexing his muscles, while in pseudo, high-pressure Americanese his barker told the story of the legend pictured on the fine broad body. And the telling took him from the soles of Ulric's feet to the crown of his proud head.

I listened, following the tale on the body. When I reached

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the kaleidoscope of colors in his face and saw the eagle spread across the hidden features, something fell into place. This man had been tattooed in Japan.

You see, I read anything. Everything. Nearly always in trains, planes, hotel lounges. And I remember what I read. Now I remembered reading about a bargain, and the terms of it were these: in Japan, if a man agreed to be tattooed from top to toe and left his body on death to a certain university, then he earned himself $3,000.

I knew this Ulric had made such a bargain and when he died his skin would join the other skins, stretched tight and taut at that university.

The booth seemed suddenly hotter. I thought I was going to fall, then inched myself to the exit, and outside breathed easier. Walking back to the circus, I tried not to recall the rest of what I had read. But my memory beat me and the air in the midway became as hot and stuffy as it had been in the booth.

This tattooing was a three-year job. It was done in small sections, because the subject could take only so many pricks at a time. No man's skin is less sensitive than another's, and the tattooist's needle is sharp.

I walked faster. I thought of the waterfalls in Japan, the coldest in the world, it is said. The stream that comes straight from the ice contains a curious fixing quality, so that between sessions the volunteer was required to stand beneath it for hours. So Ulric would have stood. He must have been in wild need of a career.

Glad to reach the normal atmosphere of Papa Gaudin's office, I embraced Madame Gaudin warmly, held her from me and praised the violet lace dress, and smiled to see her fat, comfortable, and heavy breasted. But at once the vision of a silky black beard leaped into my mind and would not budge. I asked for a straight Scotch. Quick.

The American brought the brimming glass. I saw that he was happy, the way only a performer whose ears still vibrate with the thunder of the customers' applause is happy. I liked the way he pulled the rug round Jacko's shoulders, where the ten-year-old lay fast asleep on Madame's couch. Jules had been gentle, too.

I looked at Madame and saw her eyes flicker away from mine, oddly and slyly. She knew I was thinking of Jules.

Now with the crack of his tongue, Papa had us all to business. This cat man was good, he told me, nodding sagely.

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Good enough to be exploited. Perhaps some articles, well-written, well-placed, to titillate the public's interest. Did I know a man?

I did. Harry Learoyd. A clever journalist, a man who could sense news before it was born, shape a story from almost nothing. I said I'd find him and bring him to see the cats and the sandy boy who worked them.

Learoyd wasn't difficult to trace. I only had to telephone six bars and four clubs. Our negotiation was as quick. He asked about a down payment and when I told him the notes were crackling in my hand, he was my man. I arranged to take him in front the following night.

We met in the foyer at the Olympic. I saw him first, a podgy man bulging out of his collar. He said he didn't want to see the whole of the circus, but only the cats, so I took him down the midway. I thought it was safer than a neighborhood bar, which is where he wanted to go.

He looked curiously at the booths that advertised the freaks and seemed disappointed that they weren't showing themselves. I explained that came later, when the midway was crowded. Then he asked where they lived, where they slept, and I pointed out the vans.

Just then a hand caught my arm and I turned. Of course, I knew the fellow at once. It was Harry Farr—Farr and Rix, a top-line patter act till Rix died. Harry tried to go on but one-half of an act is the same as one right-hand glove or one left-foot shoe.

I took quick stock of the jaunty check suit, the aging straw hat, and the dingy teeth in the spry old face. But when I automatically fingered my wallet, Harry stopped me, told me he was all right, minding the hoop-la with Maisie. I was glad they'd stuck together. There was a time when Rix said if Harry didn't throw Maisie out, he'd break up the act, but Harry stood by her and Rix had to give in.

We arranged to have a drink. But both of us knew it was a promise that belonged in the never-neverland. I've no time for drinks outside the ten per-cent. Harry understood that.

We shook hands warmly enough and then I looked for Learoyd. He'd disappeared. I found him peeking into a van, a van that more than likely housed a freak. I legged it hard toward him. They're touchy, these people. They don't mind being stared at in public, but they hate it in private.

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When Learoyd saw me he put his finger to his lips, stepped aside, and indicated the chink between the curtains at the window. I shook my head. Then I saw that his eyes glittered, that his skin wore a sudden sheen, and I knew what it meant. Years of dealing with newspapermen has taught me to know them. Learoyd had a story.

I felt an odd chill and the hairs on the back of my neck beginning to tingle. Those hairs act like an alarm bell to me. Thinking I'd better assess the damage, I took Learoyd's place, looked between the curtains into the van, and then I gaped.

There she sat on the edge of the bed, the bearded freak, disdainful, indifferent, for all the world like a lady of fashion attended by a chic French maid. And as her beard was combed and brushed, carefully, tenderly, she turned her head and yawned.

I knew at once the cause of Learoyd's professional excitement. For the hand that held the brush was tattooed, and the face bent over hers was green, gray, blue. A whole eagle. The king of birds.

I shivered, straightened, came away from the van and looked at Learoyd. His eyes seemed larger and he was sweating.

"I suppose it's the imperfection in each that makes the bond," he said. His voice was husky, stimulated.

I told him sharply that the down payment had been given to publicize the American, the cat man, then I took him back to the circus.

Learoyd listened, watched, made his notes, asked me the correct questions, all with the right amount of considered attention; but I wasn't fooled. I knew he hadn't forgotten the bearded lady, and a fair-sized worry began to cloud my mind.

So I stayed at his heels, then drove him home, and we discussed Papa Gaudin, the circus, the American, and cats in general. But it's the last thing a man says that counts and when I dropped him in Chelsea I heard what he said quite clearly, although his voice was low and reflective.

"If they sleep together, they might have a child. Would it be born with a beard or an eagle's beak?"

I told Learoyd to concentrate on cats. I hoped I sounded like a man who was content with the night's work. Then I left him.

The articles appeared and they were good. Papa Gaudin was satisfied and I had nothing to worry about, till the old man told me that Learoyd was

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a friendly soul, who came to see them six days out of six. Then those alarm bells of mine began to work overtime.

In my business a hunch is as good as a black and white fact. Cutting a lunch date, I went down to the Olympic, telling myself I ought to pay the American some attention, the way he was paying me ten per-cent.

Papa Gaudin opinioned if he was anywhere, he'd be with the cats, so I went to find him. There was no sign of the sandy boy, but a big broad man in a German topcoat was standing in front of the cage that held the snow-leopard. I knew I'd seen him before. Then I remembered it. Amsterdam.

I wasn't curious, I wasn't even interested. I just thought he might know where I could find the American. So I walked toward him.

He was talking to the white cat, his voice soft, fond, caressing, and I knew at once the coat had lied. He was not a German.

He heard me come behind him and turned sharply. I saw the eagle spread proudly where the features used to be. Then I looked into his eyes.

There was a little silence, while my thoughts shook into place. Now I said his name, his true name.

"Jules."

The tears started, and lay like drops of rain on the eagle's wings. I put up my hand to touch his face. I wanted him to know that I was reaching to the scars beneath and that I loved him.

He understood, and when he spoke it was to comfort me.

"I've made a life. Just sometimes I want to smell the cats."

There was another silence, then the sound of feline claws scraping jealously at the bars behind us.

Jules turned and with gentle Gallic words quietened the snow-leopard.

When next he spoke, his voice was rough.

"How long before the scribbler leaves her in peace?"

I knew that Learoyd's was a terrier's hold. He would not let go till he had his story. So I bought a little time. I made believe I hadn't understood and asked Jules to lunch with me, to sup, dine, or anything that suited him.

He raised his head, sharply and jerkily. "In my flat?" I added hurriedly.

Then Jules laughed and I saw the fine white teeth I remembered so well and experienced a generous moment that brought him back to me as he had been, healthy, strong, with a Frenchman's full appetite for

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wine, food, and women. Warm rounded women.

The mirage vanished and I saw only the beard.

Now anger took hold of me. I told Jules he was too young to hide himself behind a Japanese legend, too young to be alone.

He answered softly, "I am not alone. I live with the woman I love and who loves me."

I knew he meant the bearded lady.

"Why, Jules?" I asked helplessly.

"We are the same. Both imperfect. That is why we love each other."

I knew that theirs was a secret world and feared that if light fell on it they would be destroyed.

He took my arm and made me look at him. I regarded the part of the legend that I could see and remembered the other. Then he held out his fingers. Tiny Geisha girls danced from joint to joint, and on the palms of his hands I saw blossoms.

"Lovely blossoms in Japan," he murmured.

I marveled that there was no bitterness in his voice. Jules had triumphed.

"I'd like to meet her," I said suddenly. "Are you married?"

Jules's face darkened. I knew because his eyes changed color, and the wings of the eagle were momentarily dulled.

"No," he said.

The explanation came slowly.

"She is young. Just twenty-two. All young girls cherish dreams. She dreams of a knight on a white horse who will lift and carry her out of the circus."

His voice was compassionate. Jules had not always been a freak. He knew there would be no knight for the bearded lady.

"I'd like to meet her," I said again. "Now."

He took my arm and led me away from the snow-leopard.

"I saw you in Amsterdam," I told him. "I didn't recognize you." Then I added quickly, "You must give up that German topcoat. Buy a new one in Paris."

"I never go to France," he said. "Never." And for the first time his voice held pain.

When we reached the van, I could hear her laughing. And I heard Learoyd's strong voice that provoked the laughter.

Jules pushed the door back and we went in. They sat together on the bed. A box of chocolates was open in front of her and she was a-tinkle with giggles. The small baby-pink bow in the silk of her beard was in keeping with her mood. The van was bright with electric light. I had thought it would be near-dark. Shadows are so much kinder to hair on a woman's face.

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Mastering my repugnance, I bowed over her hand and saw the sharp pointed teeth before she turned her shoulder, looking at Learoyd, fluttering her eyelids and smiling secretly.

He stood up and stretched, a fat spaniel who had gnawed the bone clean. I knew that she had talked before he spoke Jules's name, his true name.

Then I looked at Jules, and I swear the feathers on the eagle's wings were ruffled as the face beneath contracted.

"You'll come again?" she asked Learoyd eagerly.

"Sure."

"Soon."

"I'll be around."

I knew that he was lying. Learoyd had his story. There was only stale meat here.

When I looked at Jules, I saw that he knew also. He turned to take up the brush and the comb and there was pity in his eyes. As he moved to her I knew it was time for me to go, so I followed Learoyd.

Outside the booth, he lit a cigarette and drew on it as if he'd been without for several weeks.

"Revolting, isn't she?" he said. And shuddered.

It was over breakfast in Liverpool where I had a Christmas show that I read his story. It was brilliantly graphic, the tale of the cat man who became a tattooed freak and loved a bearded lady. I guessed Learoyd had made a packet. The Sunday papers pay well.

But suddenly for some reason I wanted to see Jules again, so I skipped Leeds and caught the midday express back to London.

I found him with his love. Today the little bow was white and there was candy in front of her, there was perfume, there were long silk gloves, and there was even a flotsam of black nylon lace.

"You're spoiled," I told her. And the sight sickened me.

She put her head down on the table and sobbed. I said that Learoyd's story would be wrapping fish in a week, then I saw how Jules looked at her down-bent head and spread his varicolored fingers helplessly.

"She misses him," he stated simply.

I guessed that the ugly printed words had passed him by. He was lost in the greater tragedy of her craving for the man who wrote them.

"Learoyd's a busy man," I announced quite loudly. "He hasn't forgotten you. It's work that keeps him away."

She raised her head. Sharply. Fiercely. The hair was all about her face, thick round her brows as well as on her chin.

"It isn't work," she spat. "It's this. This beast."

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And she tore at the beard as if it were alive, apart from her, a separate thing.

Jules moved quickly, taking away her hands. "No, no, no!" he cried, as if the black silky strands she tugged trailed from his own chin.

Suddenly she quieted and I saw the pointed teeth holding her lower lip, before she pulled away from Jules's rainbow hand and screamed at both of us, "Leave me, leave me!"

Taking his arm, I drew him toward the exit. But I looked back and marked the small ugly hands with their brightly painted nails clench and unclench, then fold tightly into fists. Above the beard her brown-bead eyes steadied suddenly. I wished I knew what she was thinking.

Jules and I went to see the cats and there in front of the snow-leopard we talked. I swear I was more afraid than Jules, certain that he had lost her. Again it was he who comforted me. The beard was the screen, he said. Behind it they had their world. Just him and her. She would forget Learoyd.

I marveled at his patience, his pity, his love, then left him wooing the snow-leopard. The French words sounded soft and caressing and I could hear the beast responding, clawing and chafing at the bars.

The days went quickly after that. Sam Ellerman called me from Los Angeles. We're old enemies, but sometimes when it suits us we take in each other's washing. He had a beefsteak character making a movie in Rome. There was script trouble. Big trouble. I guessed the character couldn't speak lines. So I went over to tell the director that most movies are better without the dialogue anyway.

It was pleasant in Rome, and I let the argument linger. Sam was footing the bill and I remembered those dollars of mine he'd spent when Maxie opened in Chicago and the dwarfs took exception to the chimp man's billing and let those man-like monkeys loose on the city roofs.

When I returned to England the crocuses were out and the circus was ending. I spoke to Papa Gaudin on the telephone. He told me they were sold out right to the end. Then the old man boasted. He could speak English now, order a drink, pay for it, and tell the waitress she looked a honey. He demanded I go down on Saturday morning to bid the company farewell. I promised and went.

Of course, I looked for Jules first and found him with the American. Since Learoyd's story they had become big friends and in off times shared the key to the snow-leopard's

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cage. I guessed that Jules had emptied his memory bin for the younger man, and I hoped that in the giving he had been blessed.

He waited for me to inquire after the bearded lady, and when I did he smiled, said she was content again, enjoying life, had made several expeditions to the West End to shop. Today she'd gone to buy gloves.

My face, I knew, mirrored the shock I felt; then Jules explained she wore a veil fixed cleverly over her chin and tied behind her neck. She'd need to, I thought, or they'd be calling 'Beaver' after her. Then I chided myself. But I swear it wasn't only the beard I'd hated. Those little hands, the sharp white teeth, the mouth that I could just see, wetly red, the brown-bead eyes—those were the things that acted on me like a spider crawling down my back.

With a sensitive smile the American left us, and we found our way to the vans. There was a light in the third one and Jules exclaimed, "She's back!" His voice was gay.

As we neared the van, the light flickered and seemed to beckon. He took my arm and we hurried. Jules went in first. I followed.

She had her back to us and was taking off her gloves. The hair was thick at the nape of her neck. And the hair at the nape of mine began to tingle.

I knew before she turned. Her face was smooth. The beard was gone.

Defiantly she moved full into the light. I saw the weak rabbit chin, the small, moist, spiteful mouth, all the mean features that added up to that ugly, white, peaked face. And the tiny dark pinpricks where the hair had been.

She was more horrible without the beard than with it, and when she smiled I looked away.

Jules went to her, uncertain, dazed. And the beardless lady turned on him such a look of loathing that I felt as if she had stripped and shown me an ugly scar on her body.

When she spoke, her voice was harsh and thin and made plain that she hated him. "Get away—*freak!* All the electric treatment in the world wouldn't cleanse your skin!"

Running her hand round her hideously bare chin, she looked at me and smiled again. "You can tell your friend to come back. I've made myself pretty for him."

I saw Jules's face, saw how the wings of the eagle fluttered, saw how his eyes filled and flooded over. Then I took his arm and drew him from the van.

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Inside she was laughing as she pulled the curtains sharply, shutting herself away with her beardless chin.

I tried to reach Jules, tried to hold him. I would have taken him into the smartest, brightest, most crowded restaurant, called him my brother, anything to keep him with me.

But he put aside my hand and said, "I loved the imperfection. It healed me."

Then he went away. I knew I could not call him back. He would not hear. And if he did he would not turn.

I found Learoyd, not because I wanted to hit him or scourge him with my tongue, but because I wanted to share my filthy knowledge.

We shared it and several bottles.

The newspapers were already on the mat when Learoyd saw me to my flat. Then he stooped to lift the paper.

Jules had bound and gagged the beardless lady and put her in with the snow-leopard.

There was nothing left where the beard once grew.

"Q"

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a *NEW* story by

EDWARD WELLEN

An American charwoman this time . . . Meet Mrs. Grady, on her last night of office cleaning before her retirement, and how she left her world a little tidier than she had found it, a better place for her having been in it . . .

MRS. GRADY'S SWAN SONG

by EDWARD WELLEN

Mrs. Grady felt guilty. Not because she had skipped Sunday Mass, her feet having been too swollen for her good shoes, but because this was her last night on the job and though, as always, she would be leaving behind a suite of offices to which she had brought order out of chaos, she would be leaving behind a mess of unresolved lives that were—well, a mess.

Not that the owners of those lives knew Mrs. Grady. They would not have recognized her if they had passed her on the street or even in the corridors of the office building as they hurried out and she clumped in. Their worlds did not overlap. One world ended at 5:00 P.M., give or take a few minutes, the other world, Mrs. Grady's, began at 7:00 P.M. So none of the executives and secretaries daily occupying the Gammon, Inc. offices in the Gammon Building had any awareness of Mrs. Grady, the cleaning woman.

All they knew was that somehow, no matter how untidy the place looked when they left at the end of their workday, it looked fresh and tidy when they came back in the morning. If they thought about it at all they realized there had to be human hands setting everything right. But that the hands were Mrs. Grady's was one of the unknowns in a world where everyone takes too much for granted.

On the other hand, Mrs. Grady knew them all. Oh, did she know them! They had be-

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come more than merely nameplates on desks or titles on doors. They had become people whose ghostly but all-too-human presence filled the weary and lonely watches of her night. And they were all the more human to her by the frailties their unwary leavings spelled out.

Not every scrap of interesting information went into the office shredder to add itself to universal debris. People were people and therefore careless and forgetful. Many a clue of a business nature—scribbles dealing with upcoming mergers or divestitures and with contracts firmly in hand or falling through—lay open to Mrs. Grady's view once she smoothed out a crumple of paper or scanned a notepad.

If Mrs. Grady's mind had worked that way, her quick eye could have led her to a killing or at least a wounding in the stock market. She might have retired long before tonight and on much more than her Social Security. But she focused her quick eye on the human thing, not on the lucrative. Instead of following the fortunes of the business, anticipating the ups and downs of Gammon stock, she followed the fortunes of Gammon people.

Thanks to crumples of paper and indentations on notepads and peeps into drawers she knew their characters and their secrets.

She knew that Mr. Gammon himself was a piratical mean-spirited old man who popped B-complex capsules by the handful, no doubt trying to live up to his image of 30 years before. His portrait dominated the boardroom. That slit of a mouth had sucked in business and hirelings and had spat out juiceless husks: the artist had pretended to idealize him but the ruthlessness had come through.

Besides, she had other evidence. One of the firm's enterprises was air freight and she had seen a memo from Mr. Gammon ordering hazardous cargo aboard passenger planes even if it meant the use of misleading labeling. "The name of the game is to ship the stuff, not to insure safety," the memo had said. And she had seen an entry in his tickler file reminding him to see about firing older employees just before they earned their pension rights.

Mrs. Grady had hoped Mr. Gammon would step down or move aside and let Mr. Riley become President or Chairman of the Board. But that did not seem any more likely now than it had years ago. Without ever having met him, Mr. Riley had become Mrs. Grady's favorite.

She knew that he smoked too

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much. But he was neat about it. He was also thoughtful enough to leave his copy of the afternoon paper for her, as though he knew she could do with something to read on the long subway ride home, and the paper always had its front page first, as good as new. A little thing, maybe, but it loomed big in Mrs. Grady's mind and heart.

Mr. Hastings, on the other hand, another V.P., was her unfavorite. He regularly left remains of his snacks, circles and drippings, scatters of cigarette stubs and ashes, even heelprints on his desk, and word had got back to her that twice he had complained of the cleaning woman filching change and candy bars from his desk drawer. Of course that was only his greedy forgetfulness talking. As if she had need of his coins or his sweets!

Mrs. Grady earned her own keep and paid her own way. She had done so all her life and would continue to do so even after retiring. Let others do the same, and let others cast no names, and the world would be a better place.

She did not scant Mr. Hastings' office, even on this last night, but moved on as quickly as she decently could. Her cleaning routine brought her to Miss Vandeveer's desk. Miss Vandeveer, now, was a sad case, though Mrs. Grady would be the last to throw the first stone.

She knew that Miss Vandeveer had been having an affair with Mr. Cole, the office manager. Notes between them had turned up in their wastebaskets. Nothing would ever come of the affair but despair. Mr. Cole had desk photos of his wife and three kids, and Mrs. Grady had never yet found it necessary to dust the glass and frames.

It would seem that Miss Vandeveer had finally caught on. And finding out must have been shattering to her. Lately the poor silly thing had been building up a deadly supply of prescription sleeping capsules. Mrs. Grady sent up a little prayer.

Mrs. Grady worked Miss Vandeveer's drawer open and drew in her breath. Another little bottle with a fresh label. Today Miss Vandeveer had seen yet another doctor on her lunch hour, had gone to yet another druggist to fill yet another prescription. Mrs. Grady knew it would not be long before Miss Vandeveer nerved herself to give up on Mr. Cole and do the sinful foolish deed.

Sighing, she moved on to Mr. Degener's. She knew that Mr.

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Degener was a secret drinker. He kept his lowest drawer locked, but a sniff of the paper cups in his wastebasket, plus the empty packages of breath-disguising pastilles, told her there had to be a fifth or something in that locked drawer.

Shortly after Miss Vandeveer had come to work here, Mr. Degener had moved his desk around to give him a constant view of Miss Vandeveer. For a while Mrs. Grady had hoped Miss Vandeveer would be the one to wean Mr. Degener from his bottle. But the notes between her and Mr. Cole had begun and, to go by the number of cups, Mr. Degener had only got worse.

Shaking her head, Mrs. Grady gave Mr. Degener's desk a last fond wipe and moved on to Mrs. Fiore's.

Mrs. Fiore was a nice enough young woman, but anxious to get on. It showed in the mistakes she made in her over-eagerness, mistakes she carefully buried at the bottom of her wastebasket. She was still too new in her job for Mrs. Grady to have a fix on her: bad luck, that. Since Mrs. Grady would not be coming here any more after tonight, Mrs. Fiore's character would remain a relative unknown.

But as if to tantalize Mrs. Grady to the end of her days something new and strange turned up this very night.

In Mrs. Fiore's wastebasket Mrs. Grady found wad upon wad of facial tissue. They did not have the exploded look of tissues someone had used for a bad cold but the soft damp look of tissues someone had used for a good cry.

It was payday, but there was no pink slip in the wastebasket, so the chances were they hadn't fired her. Besides, though her desk seemed in some disarray, there was no sign she had emptied it of her personal belongings. A quarrel, then, with her husband? Or some bad news? Or had Miss Moffett leaned on her?

In puzzlement Mrs. Grady moved on to Miss Moffett, who was Mr. Gammon's secretary. Miss Moffett was the office's oldest employee, so you'd think Mrs. Grady would have a handle on her by now. The best Mrs. Grady could sum up was that Miss Moffett was a perfectionist intolerant of her own and others' imperfections. Though to tell the truth and shame the devil, she had always given Mrs. Grady the least trouble of any of the lot, even Mr. Riley.

But Miss Moffett's neatness smacked of prissiness. Mrs. Grady had her suspicions of that kind of personality. She

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guessed that if she had a look into Miss Moffett's head she would find all sorts of untidiness.

Tonight, though, with Miss Moffett as with Mrs. Fiore, Mrs. Grady ran into another surprise.

Miss Moffett's desk looked as if a genteel whirlwind had swept throught it. Mrs. Grady had to smile. Wouldn't you know her last day would be the hardest!

It wasn't till she emptied Miss Moffett's wastebasket that she figured out what it had all been about. There had been something of a search and something of a to-do. But for all the fuss the one place they hadn't searched was Miss Moffett's wastebasket.

Miss Moffett's pay envelope, still sealed and nicely padded, fell out. Mrs. Grady, gingerly picking it up, saw what had happened.

In turning to answer an intercom call—one from Mr. Gammon would make her jump and forget everything else—Miss Moffett had unknowingly elbowed her pay envelope into her own wastebasket. It had worked its way to the bottom, past lighter crumples of paper, and had buried itself there. By the time Miss Moffett remembered the envelope, it had vanished.

Now the damp facial tissues Mrs. Grady had found in Mrs. Fiore's wastebasket fitted in. Mrs. Fiore, being nearest, had come under suspicion and had wept. "Search my desk. Search me, if you want to!" And Miss Moffett had wanted to.

Mrs. Grady could see it and hear it, plain as plain. Now, more than ever, it seemed to Mrs. Grady that cutting her ties with Gammon, Inc. was just like swearing off watching a soap opera in mid-season. She could not leave all these loose ends behind, all these lives up in the air. She pressed her lips together. She knew what she had to do and she would do it.

Holding the pay envelope by the edge so as not to leave fingerprints, Mrs. Grady slit the flap carefully and shook out onto the desk Miss Moffett's take-home pay—$314.28. The $314 went under the top band of one of Mrs. Grady's support stockings. She put the 28 cents into Mr. Hastings' desk drawer, alongside his half-eaten candy bar. The empty pay envelope she stuck under the seat cushion of his visitor's chair, letting one edge peep out on the side nearest the wall. Sooner or later someone would spot it—not Mr. Hastings himself, she hoped. And then Mr. Hastings would have some explaining to do.

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Well, she had brought some order out of chaos. But as Mrs. Grady finished up she thought about Miss Vandeveer and sighed. That bit of disorder remained. Then she brightened, her face polishing itself with inspiration. One thing more and her last night's work would be complete.

She drew two paper cups from the dispenser by the water cooler. Into one she poured all Miss Vandeveer's sleeping capsules. She carried them to Mr. Gammon's private washroom off his inner office, poured the same level of B-complex capsules out of his large economy-size bottle into the empty cup. She poured the sleeping capsules into the B-complex bottle and shook well.

Mr. Gammon would not swallow enough at any one time to put him to sleep for good. But he would swallow enough to slow his thinking, to cause him to make humbling mistakes. If her mind had run that way, Mrs. Grady would have begun considering going short on Gammon, Inc. stock. What she was thinking, though, was that maybe at last Mr. Riley would be taking Mr. Gammon's place.

She returned to Miss Vandeveer's desk and poured the B-complex capsules into the bottles. The B-complex capsules should work like—what was the word these days?—uppers. At least Miss Vandeveer, if she took what she believed was a fatal dose, would merely have a spell of good health and a chance to get over Mr. Cole. And maybe Mr. Degener would help her.

Mrs. Grady paused on her slow way out. Was that all? Here, yes. Tonight and forever. She had made sure to wipe her fingerprints off the bottles before replacing them, the way all good criminals should. Still she frowned, sensing she had overlooked something. Ah, yes. The money. Her church opened early and on her way home she would stop in and put Miss Moffett's pay into the poor box.

She did not look back. There was nothing to look back to. A lifetime of cleaning—and cleaning at best was only a staving off; you could not hope to win in the end, not against wear, dust, time. But what she felt as she left was not sadness. She had done her best to bring order to her world.

"Q"

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a HERCULE POIROT detective story by

AGATHA CHRISTIE

One of the best short stories about Hercule Poirot . . . in which the man with the egg-shaped head is confronted by a restaurant mystery. The magnificent Poirot, so fastidious, so precise, has a nice taste for food, but no sauce, however appetizing, can fool those little gray cells. If the fish underneath is bad, Poirot's nose knows—he can smell a red herring in any culinary disguise . . .

THE REGULAR CUSTOMER

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

Hercule Poirot was dining with his friend, Henry Bonnington, at the Gallant Endeavour in the King's Road, Chelsea.

Mr. Bonnington was fond of the Gallant Endeavour. He liked the leisurely atmosphere; he liked the food which was "plain" and "English" and "not a lot of made-up messes."

Molly, the sympathetic waitress, greeted him as an old friend. She prided herself on remembering her customers' likes and dislikes in food.

"Good evening, sir," she said, as the two men took their seats at a corner table. "You're in luck today—turkey stuffed with chestnuts—that's your favorite, isn't it? And ever such a nice Stilton we've got! Will you have soup first or fish?"

The question of food and wine settled, Mr. Bonnington unfolded his napkin with a sigh as Molly sped away.

"Good girl, that!" he said approvingly. "Was quite a beauty once—artists used to paint her. She knows about food, too—and that's a great deal more important. Women are very unsound on food as a rule. There's many a woman, if she goes out with a fellow she fancies, won't even notice what she eats. She'll just order the first thing she sees on the menu."

"The Regular Customer" from Three Blind Mice.
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Hercule Poirot shook his head.

"*C'est terrible.*"

"Men aren't like that, thank goodness," said Mr. Bonnington complacently.

"Never?" There was a twinkle in Hercule Poirot's eye.

"Well, perhaps when they're very young," conceded Mr. Bonnington. "Young puppies! Young fellows nowadays are all the same—no guts—no stamina. I've no use for the young—and they," he added with strict impartiality, "have no use for me. Perhaps they're right! But to hear some of these young fellows talk you'd think no man had a right to be *alive* after sixty! From the way they go on, you'd wonder more of them didn't help their elderly relations out of the world."

"It is possible," said Hercule Poirot, "that they do."

"Nice mind you've got, Poirot, I must say. All this police work saps your ideals."

Hercule Poirot smiled.

"Nevertheless," he said, "it would be interesting to make a table of accidental deaths over the age of sixty . . . But tell me, my friend, of your own affairs. How does the world go with you?"

"Mess!" said Mr. Bonnington. "That's what's the matter with the world nowadays. Too much mess. And too much fine language. The fine language helps to conceal the mess. Like a highly flavored sauce concealing the fact that the fish underneath it is none of the best! Give me an honest fillet of sole and no messy sauce over it."

It was given him at that moment by Molly and he grunted approval.

"You know just what I like, my girl," he said.

"Well, you come here pretty regular. So I ought to know."

Hercule Poirot said, "Do people then always like the same things? Do not they like a change sometimes?"

"Not gentlemen, sir. Ladies like variety—gentlemen always like the same things."

"What did I tell you?" grunted Bonnington. "Women are fundamentally unsound about food."

He looked around the restaurant.

"The world's a funny place. See that odd-looking old fellow with a beard in the corner? Molly will tell you he's always here Tuesday and Thursday nights. Yet nobody here knows his name or where he lives or what his business is. It's rather odd."

When the waitress brought the portions of turkey he said, "I see you've still got Old Father Time over there."

"That's right, sir. Tuesdays

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and Thursdays his days are: Not but what he came in here on a *Monday* last week! It quite upset me! I felt I'd got my dates wrong and that it must be Tuesday without my knowing it. But he came in the next night as well—so the Monday was just a kind of extra, so to speak."

"An interesting deviation from habit," murmured Poirot. "I wonder what the reason was."

"Well, sir, if you ask me, I think he'd had some kind of upset or worry."

"Why did you think that? His manner?"

"No, sir, not his manner exactly. He was very quiet as he always is. Never says much except 'Good evening' when he come and goes. No, it was his *order*."

"His order?"

"I daresay you gentlemen will laugh at me." Molly flushed. "But when a gentleman has been here for ten years, you get to know his likes and dislikes. He never could bear suet pudding or blackberries and I've never known him to take thick soup—but on that Monday night he ordered thick tomato soup, beefsteak and kidney pudding and blackberry tart! Seemed as though he just didn't notice *what* he ordered!"

"Do you know," said Poirot, "I find that extraordinarily interesting."

Molly looked gratified and departed.

"Well, Poirot," said Henry Bonnington with a chuckle. "Let's have a few deductions in your best manner."

"I would prefer to hear yours first."

"Want me to be Watson, eh? Well, old fellow went to a doctor and the doctor changed his diet."

"To thick tomato soup, steak and kidney pudding and blackberry tart? I cannot imagine any doctor doing that."

"Doctors will put you onto anything."

"That is the only solution that occurs to you?"

Henry Bonnington said, "Well, seriously, I suppose there's only one explanation possible. Our unknown friend was in the grip of some powerful mental emotion. He was so perturbed by it that he literally did not notice what he was ordering or eating."

He paused a minute, and then said, "You'll be telling me next that you know just *what* was on his mind. You'll say perhaps that he was making up his mind to commit a murder."

He laughed at his own suggestion.

Hercule Poirot did not laugh.

He has admitted that at that

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moment he was seriously worried. He claims that he ought then to have had some inkling of what was to occur.

His friends assure him that such an idea is quite fantastic.

It was some three weeks later that Hercule Poirot and Bonnington met again, this time in the subway.

They nodded to each other, swaying about, hanging onto adjacent straps. Then at Piccadilly Circus there was a general exodus and they found seats right at the forward end of the car, a peaceful spot since nobody passed in or out that way.

"By the way," said Mr. Bonnington. "Do you remember that old boy we noticed at the Gallant Endeavour? I shouldn't wonder if he'd hopped it to a better world. He's not been there for a whole week. Molly's quite upset."

Hercule Poirot's eyes flashed.

"Indeed?" he said. "Indeed?"

Bonnington said, "D'you remember I suggested he'd been to a doctor and been put on a diet? Diet's nonsense of course—but I shouldn't wonder if he *had* consulted a doctor about his health and what the doctor said gave him a bit of a jolt. That would account for him ordering things off the menu without noticing what he was doing. Quite likely the jolt he got hurried him out of the world sooner than he would have gone otherwise. Doctors ought to be careful what they tell a chap."

"They usually are," said Poirot.

"This is my station," said Mr. Bonnington. "Bye-bye. Don't suppose we shall ever know now who the old boy was, not even his name. Funny world!"

He hurried out of the car.

Hercule Poirot, sitting frowning, looked as though he did not think it was such a funny world.

He went home and gave certain instructions to his faithful valet, Georges, and presently was running his finger down a list of names. It was a record of deaths within a certain area.

Poirot's finger stopped.

"Henry Gascoigne, 69. I might try him first."

Later in the day Hercule Poirot was sitting in Dr. MacAndrew's office just off the King's Road. MacAndrew was a tall red-haired Scotsman with an intelligent face.

"Gascoigne?" he said. "Yes, that's right. Eccentric old bird. Lived alone in one of those derelict old houses. I hadn't attended him before, but I'd seen him about and I knew who he was. It was the dairy people got the wind up first. The milk bot-

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tles began to pile up outside. In the end the people next door sent word to the police and they broke the door in and found him. He'd pitched down the stairs and broken his neck. Had on an old dressing gown with a ragged cord—might easily have tripped himself up with it."

"I see," said Hercule Poirot. "It was quite simple—an accident."

"That's right."

"Had he any relations?"

"There's a nephew. Used to come along and see his uncle about once a month. Ramsey, his name is, Dr. George Ramsey. Lives at Wimbledon."

"How long had Mr. Gascoigne been dead when you saw him?"

"Ah!" said Dr. MacAndrew. "This is where we get official. Not less than forty-eight hours and not more than seventy-two hours. He was found on the morning of the sixth. Actually, we got closer than that. He had a letter in the pocket of his dressing gown—written on the third—posted in Wimbledon that afternoon—would have been delivered somewhere around 9:20 P.M.

"That puts the time of death at after 9:20 on the evening of the third. That agrees with the contents of the stomach and the processes of digestion. He had had a meal about two hours before death. I examined him on the morning of the sixth and his condition was quite consistent with death having occurred sixty hours previously—around 10:00 P.M. on the third."

"It all seems very consistent. Tell me, when was he last seen alive?"

"He was seen in the King's Road about seven o'clock that same evening, Thursday the third, and he dined at the Gallant Endeavour restaurant at 7:30. It seems he always dined there on Thursdays."

"He had no other relations? Only this nephew?"

"There was a twin brother. The whole story is rather curious. They hadn't seen each other for years. As a young man Henry was by way of being an artist, you know. An extremely bad one. It seems the other brother, Anthony Gascoigne, married a very rich woman and gave up art, and the brothers quarreled over it. Hadn't seen each other since, I believe.

But oddly enough, *they died on the same day.* The elder twin passed away at one o'clock on the afternoon of the third. Probably just a coincidence, but there it is."

"Is the other brother's wife alive?"

"No, she died some years ago."

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"Where did Anthony Gascoigne live?"

"He had a house on Kingston Hill. He was, I believe, from what Dr. Ramsey tells me, very much of a recluse."

Hercule Poirot nodded thoughtfully.

The Scotsman looked at him keenly.

"What exactly have you got in your mind, M. Poirot?" he asked bluntly. "I've answered your questions, as was my duty seeing the credentials you brought. But I'm in the dark as to what it's all about."

Poirot said slowly, "A simple case of accidental death, that's what you said. What I have in mind is equally simple—a simple push."

Dr. MacAndrew looked startled.

"In other words, murder! Have you any grounds for that belief?"

"No," said Poirot. "It is a mere supposition."

"There must be something," persisted the other.

Poirot did not speak.

MacAndrew said, "If it's the nephew, Ramsey, you suspect, I don't mind telling you here and now that you are barking up the wrong tree. Ramsey was playing bridge in Wimbledon from 8:30 till midnight. That came out at the inquest."

Poirot murmured, "And presumably it was verified. The police are careful."

The doctor said, "Perhaps you know something against him?"

"I didn't know that there was such a person until you mentioned him."

"Then you suspect somebody else?"

"No, no. It is not that at all. It's a case of the routine habits of the human animal. That is very important. And the dead M. Gascoigne does not fit in. It is all wrong, you see."

"I really don't understand." The doctor looked puzzled.

Hercule Poirot smiled. He rose and the doctor rose also.

"You know," said MacAndrew, "honestly I can't see anything the least bit suspicious about the death of Henry Gascoigne."

The little man spread out his hands.

"I'm an obstinate man—a man with a little idea—and nothing to support it. By the way, did Henry Gascoigne have false teeth?"

"No, his own teeth were in excellent preservation. Very creditable indeed at his age."

"He looked after them well—they were white and well brushed?"

"Yes, I noticed them particularly."

"Not discolored in any way?"

"No. I don't think he was a

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smoker if that is what you mean."

"I did not mean that precisely—it was just a long shot—which probably will not come off. Goodbye, Dr. MacAndrew. Thank you for your kindness."

He shook the doctor's hand and departed.

"And now," he said, "for the long shot."

At the Gallant Endeavour he sat down at the same table he had shared with Bonnington. The girl who served him was not Molly. Molly, the girl told him, was away on a holiday.

It was just seven and Hercule Poirot found no difficulty in entering into conversation with the girl on the subject of old Mr. Gascoigne.

"Yes," she said. "He'd been here for years and years. But none of us girls ever knew his name. We saw about the inquest in the paper and there was a picture of him. 'There,' I said to Molly, 'if that isn't our Old Father Time—' as we used to call him."

"He dined here on the evening of his death, did he not?"

"That's right. Thursday, the third. He was always here on Tuesdays and Thursdays —punctual as a clock."

"You don't remember, I suppose, what he had for dinner?"

"Now let me see, it was mulligatawny soup, that's right, and beefsteak pudding or was it the mutton?—no, pudding, that's right, and blackberry-and-apple pie and cheese. And then to think of him going home and falling down those stairs that very same evening. A frayed dressing-gown cord they said it was as caused it. Of course, his clothes were always something awful—old-fashioned and put on anyhow, and all tattered, and yet he *had* a kind of air, all the same, as though he was *somebody!* Oh, we get all sorts of interesting customers here."

She moved off.

Hercule Poirot ate his sole.

Armed with introductions from a certain influential quarter, Hercule Poirot found no difficulty at all in dealing with the coroner for the district.

"A curious figure, the deceased man Gascoigne," he observed. "A lonely, eccentric old fellow. But his decease seems to arouse unusual attention."

He looked with some curiosity at his visitor as he spoke.

Hercule Poirot chose his words carefully. "There are circumstances connected with it, Monsieur, which make investigation desirable."

"Well, how can I help you?"

"It is, I believe, within your province to order documents

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produced in your court to be destroyed, or to be impounded, as you think fit. A certain letter was found in the pocket of Henry Gascoigne's dressing gown, was it not? A letter from his nephew, Dr. George Ramsey?"

"Quite correct. The letter was produced at the inquest as helping to fix the time of death."

"Is that letter still available?"

Hercule Poirot waited rather anxiously for the reply.

When he heard that the letter was still available for examination he drew a sigh of relief.

When it was finally produced he studied it with some care. It was written in a slightly cramped handwriting with a stylographic pen. It ran as follows:

"Dear Uncle Henry:

I am sorry to tell you that I have had no success as regards Uncle Anthony. He showed no enthusiasm for a visit from you and would give me no reply to your request that he would let bygones be bygones. He is, of course, extremely ill, and his mind is inclined to wander. I should fancy that the end is very near. He seemed hardly to remember who you were.

I am sorry to have failed you, but I can assure you that I did my best.

Your affectionate nephew,
GEORGE RAMSEY."

The letter itself was dated 3rd November. Poirot glanced at the envelope's postmark—4:30 P.M.

He murmured, "It is beautifully in order, is it not?"

Kingston Hill was Hercule Poirot's next objective. After a little trouble, with the exercise of good-humored pertinacity, he obtained an interview with Amelia Hill, cook-housekeeper to the late Anthony Gascoigne.

Mrs. Hill was inclined to be stiff and suspicious at first, but the charming geniality of this strange-looking foreigner soon had its effect. Mrs. Amelia Hill found herself, as had so many other women before her, pouring out her troubles to a sympathetic listener.

For fourteen years she had had charge of Mr. Gascoigne's household—*not* an easy job! No, indeed! Many a woman would have quailed under the burdens *she* had had to bear! Eccentric the poor gentleman was and no denying it. Remarkably close with his money—a kind of mania with him it was—and he as rich a gentleman as might be!

But Mrs. Hill had served him faithfully, and put up with his ways, and naturally she'd expected at any rate a *remembrance*. But no, nothing

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at all! Just an old will that left all his money to his wife and if she predeceased him, then everything to his brother, Henry. A will made years ago. It didn't seem fair!

Gradually Hercule Poirot detached her from her main theme of unsatisfied cupidity. It was indeed a heartless injustice! Mrs. Hill could not be blamed for feeling hurt and surprised. It was well known that Mr. Gascoigne was tightfisted about money. It had even been said that the dead man had refused his only brother assistance. Mrs. Hill probably knew all about that.

"Was that what Dr. Ramsey came to see him about?" asked Mrs. Hill. "I knew it was something about his brother, but I thought it was just that his brother wanted to be reconciled. They'd quarreled years ago."

"I understand," said Poirot, "that Mr. Gascoigne refused absolutely?"

"That's right enough," said Mrs. Hill with a nod. "'*Henry?*' he says, rather weaklike. '*What's this about Henry? Haven't seen him for years and don't want to. Quarrelsome fellow, Henry.*' Just that."

The conversation then reverted to Mrs. Hill's own special grievances.

With some difficulty Hercule Poirot took his leave without breaking off the conversation too abruptly.

And so, just after the dinner hour, he came to Elmcrest, Dorset Road, Wimbledon, the residence of Dr. George Ramsey.

The doctor was in. Hercule Poirot was shown into the office and there presently Dr. George Ramsey came to him, obviously just risen from the dinner table.

"I'm not a patient, Doctor," said Hercule Poirot. "And my coming here is, perhaps, somewhat of an impertinence—but I believe in plain and direct dealing. I do not care for lawyers and their long-winded, roundabout methods."

He had certainly aroused Ramsey's interest. The doctor was a clean-shaven man of middle height. His hair was brown but his eyelashes were almost white, which gave his eyes a pale, boiled appearance. His manner was brisk and not without humor.

"Lawyers?" he said, raising his eyebrows. "Hate the fellows! You rouse my curiosity, my dear sir. Pray sit down."

Poirot did so and then produced one of his professional cards.

George Ramsey's white eyelashes blinked.

"Naturally," said Dr. George Ramsey, with a slight twinkle.

"As you say, naturally," a-

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greed Poirot. "Women distrust the official police. They prefer private investigations. They do not want to have their troubles made public. An elderly woman came to consult me a few days ago. She was unhappy about a husband she'd quarreled with many years before. This husband of hers was your uncle, the late Mr. Gascoigne."

George Ramsey's face went purple.

"My uncle? Nonsense! His wife died many years ago."

"Not your uncle, Mr. *Anthony* Gascoigne. Your uncle, Mr. *Henry* Gascoigne."

"Uncle Henry? But *he* wasn't married!"

"Oh, yes, he was," said Hercule Poirot, lying unblushingly. "Not a doubt of it. The lady even brought along her marriage certificate."

"It's a lie!" cried George Ramsey. His face was now as purple as a plum. "I don't believe it. You're an impudent liar."

"It is too bad, is it not?" said Poirot. "You have committed murder for nothing."

"Murder?" Ramsey's voice quavered. His pale eyes bulged with terror.

"By the way," said Poirot, "I see you have been eating blackberry tart again. An unwise habit. Blackberries are said to be full of vitamins, but they may be deadly in other ways. On this occasion I rather fancy they have helped to put a rope around a man's neck —your neck, Dr. Ramsey."

"You see, *mon ami*, where you went wrong was over your fundamental assumption." Hercule Poirot, beaming placidly across the table at his friend, waved an expository hand. "A man under severe mental stress doesn't choose that time to do something that he's never done before. His reflexes just follow the track of least resistance. A man who is upset about something *might* conceivably come down to dinner dressed in his pajamas—but they will be his *own* pajamas, not somebody else's.

"A man who dislikes thick soup, suet pudding, and blackberries suddenly orders all three one evening. *You* say, because he is thinking of something else. But *I say that a man who has got something on his mind will order automatically the dish he has ordered most often before.*

"*Eh bien*, what other explanation could there be? I simply could not think of a reasonable explanation. And I was worried! The incident was all wrong.

"Then you told me that the man had disappeared. He had missed a Tuesday and a Thurs-

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day the first time for years. I liked that even less. A queer hypothesis sprang up in my mind. If I were right about it, *the man was dead.* I made inquiries. The man *was* dead. And he was very neatly and tidily dead. In other words the bad fish was covered up with the sauce!

"He had been seen in the King's Road at seven o'clock. He had dinner here at 7:30—two hours before he died. It all fitted in—the evidence of the stomach contents, the evidence of the letter. Much too much sauce! You couldn't see the fish at all!

"Devoted nephew wrote the letter, devoted nephew had beautiful alibi for time of death. Death very simple—a fall down the stairs. Simple accident? Or murder? Everyone says the former.

"Devoted nephew only surviving relative. Devoted nephew will inherit—but is there anything *to* inherit? Uncle notoriously poor.

"But there is a brother. And brother in his time had married a rich wife. And brother lives in a big rich house on Kingston Hill, so it would seem that rich wife must have left him all her money. You see the sequence—rich wife leaves money to Anthony, Anthony leaves money to Henry, Henry's money goes to George."

"A pretty theory," said Mr. Bonnington. "But what did you do?"

"Once you *know*—you can usually get hold of what you want. Henry had died two hours after a *meal*—that is all the inquest really bothered about. But supposing that meal was not dinner, but *lunch*? Put yourself in George's place. George wants money—badly. Anthony Gascoigne is dying—but his death is no good to George. His money goes to Henry, and Henry Gascoigne may live for years. So Henry must die, too—and the sooner the better—but his death must take place *after* Anthony's, and at the same time George must have an alibi.

"Henry's habit of dining regularly at a restaurant on two evenings of the week suggests an alibi to George. Being cautious, he tries his plan out first. *He impersonates his uncle one Monday evening at the restaurant in question.*

"It goes without a hitch. Everyone there accepts him as his uncle. He is satisfied. He has only to wait till Uncle Anthony shows definite signs of pegging out. The time comes. He mails a letter to his uncle on the afternoon of the second November but dates it the

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third. He comes up to town on the afternoon of the third, calls on his uncle, and carries his scheme into action. A sharp shove and down the stairs goes Uncle Henry.

"George hunts about for the letter he has written and shoves it in the pocket of his uncle's dressing gown. At 7:30 he is at the Gallant Endeavour, beard, bushy eyebrows, all complete. Undoubtedly Mr. Henry Gascoigne is alive at 7:30. Then a rapid metamorphosis in a lavatory and back full speed to Wimbledon and an evening of bridge. The perfect alibi."

Mr. Bonnington looked at him.

"But the postmark on the letter?"

"Oh, that was very simple. The postmark was smudgy. Why? It had been altered with lampblack from November second to November third. You would not notice it *unless you were looking for it.* And finally there were the blackbirds."

"Blackbirds?"

"Four-and-twenty blackbirds baked in a pie! Or blackberries if you prefer to be literal. George, you comprehend, was after all not quite a good enough actor. He *looked* like his uncle and *walked* like his uncle and *spoke* like his uncle and had his uncle's beard and eyebrows, but he forgot to *eat* like his uncle. He ordered the dishes that he himself liked.

"Blackberries discolor the teeth—the corpse's teeth were not discolored, and yet Henry Gascoigne ate blackberries at the Gallant Endeavour that night. But there were no blackberries in the stomach. I asked this morning. Plenty of evidence once you look for it. I called on George and rattled him. That finished it! He had been eating blackberries again, by the way. A greedy fellow—cared a lot about food. *Eh bien*, greed will hang him all right unless I am very much mistaken."

A waitress brought them two portions of blackberry-and-apple tart.

"Take it away," said Mr. Bonnington. "One can't be too careful. Bring me a small helping of sago pudding."

"Q"

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 426th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . a curious story, with a curiously hypnotic quality . . .

The author, Mark Blake, submitted this first story two years after he was graduated from college. In those two years he "tried various jobs . . . cab driver, assistant hotel manager, social worker, ranch hand, lifeguard . . ." Recently he moved to Hawaii where he is working on a novel and a play . . .

THE COMMAND

by MARK BLAKE

"Come on, honey, wake up for a minute. Please, I've got to talk to you. Yes, I know what time it is, and I'm sorry but it just couldn't wait. I *know* you hate being woken up—after thirteen years I ought to know. And believe me, I agree with you. If I'd made a habit of it you'd have divorced me ten years ago. Please, this isn't funny. I don't know how much more serious it could be.

"God, how do you start telling something like this? I never believed it could happen—that you could forget something, put it out of your head, and years later you wake up in the middle of a calm night unable to think of anything else. Honey, there's something I have to tell you, a—well, an incident, something that happened a long time before we got married. I didn't tell you then because it never even occurred to me to tell you. That's the only reason. I hope you'll believe that.

"I had—well, I knew this guy in college and a few years after. Knew him too well to call him a friend, though I liked him a lot and respected him even more. He was a little guy, not much more than half my size. Strong enough, I guess, but somehow he always looked kind of soft. Smart as they come—always kept himself in perfect control.

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"Like the way he drank—poured booze down his throat sometimes like he was a funnel leading into a tank car. Sometimes he'd get a bit rowdy, would stumble around, laugh more than usual. Other times he'd get depressed, sort of quiet and moody. But either way, if you put him behind the wheel of a car, or started a serious conversation or someone got sick and needed help, he'd go sober as a Sunday school teacher right in front of your eyes. I don't mean he was a lush, or anything—he didn't really drink as much as most guys I've known. But he handled it better than anybody I've seen before or since.

"When he first came up to school, he wanted to be a teacher. You should have seen him with kids. He'd walk into a pack of screaming brats and thirty seconds later they'd follow him to the ends of the earth, on foot. He never had any trouble at all getting kids to do schoolwork—they'd come up to him and ask for more when they got finished. But more than anything else, I think he actually listened to youngsters, any age, instead of shunting them off like most adults do.

"Halfway through school he got sidetracked by financial trouble back home where he came from. One of his relatives—an aunt, I think, because his parents were dead—anyway, one of his relatives found herself owing more money than she could pay. So he finagled a loan and a partial scholarship and switched over to the business school. He did almost as well there as in education, but I always had the idea he planned to go back to getting a teaching degree once those debts were paid off.

"There was another side to him, but I only saw it once. No, twice. One time, I don't remember exactly why, he and I took off and hit a string of bars in one night, maybe a dozen of them, all over town. Somehow, I'm pretty sure it was his suggestion; we ended up in the wrong kind of place. Nearly any town, there's at least one spot where a college kid can start a fight just by walking in the door late at night.

"We sauntered in, blind to the world and really plastered, ordered drinks, and about two minutes later the whole place exploded. He didn't start it, not legally, and the cops let us go. I'd have sworn he was about two drinks away from oblivion when we'd come in. He was just about reeling. But when that ruckus started. He turned into a different man, a complete stranger.

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"He became the fastest human being I ever saw—hit guys once, twice sometimes, and they were out of it. Like some kind of threshing machine, chopping his way through the pack. I just stood there bugeyed. He had the damnedest look on his face—hard and glossy like some kind of a mask, except the ends of his mouth kept pushing up. Like he was trying to smile, or trying not to—I couldn't tell. Before the bartender even got to the phone, everybody else was down, and he was going after the ones on the floor. He'd have killed somebody for sure if I hadn't pried him off.

"That was in his sophomore year, but he never did anything quite like that again. Never talked about it either. Almost never. I'd have expected it somehow when he had to quit education, but it didn't happen. When he graduated, he got a job right here in town—a good spot in the branch office of an out-of-town firm. Of course, I was already working for Dad's company, so we still saw each other fairly often. He was making good money, living in a nice apartment, and still sending money to that aunt of his. A degree counted for more then, and like I said, he learned things quicker than most, so he seemed pretty well set.

"Not much more than a year later the whole crazy world seemed to fall apart for him. A big chunk of cash turned up missing in the place where he worked, and he got charged with it. To tell you the truth, I can't positively say whether he stole the money or not. Don't get me wrong, I'd have believed whatever he told me; but he never said anything, not to me.

"We talked a lot, both during the police investigation and the trial, but always about what would happen if he got convicted. He never tried to tell me his side of it. For the life of me I never figured out whether he couldn't tell me or he didn't feel the need to.

"One night towards the end, when things had begun to look awfully bad for him, he showed up at my place around ten in the evening carrying a bag full of quarts. We got down to some serious drinking, him doing the pouring. He was laughing his head off at first, but inside of an hour or so he hit bottom and stuck there, talking about going to jail and what it would do to his life.

"For a long while all I remembered was his voice, kind of hollow against the background of the radio. Broken phrases and a flat tone. I probably did some talking too, but I don't remember any of it. Any-

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way, somewhere towards early morning he sat straight up in his chair and started talking crisp and hard—like he was trying to drive something through alcohol.

"He said only one thing bothered him about going to jail, *really* bothered him. It wasn't being closed in so much as who he'd be closed in with. He was worried, terrified, that the conditions and people in there would strengthen a part of him that he didn't like at all. I didn't ask him what he meant, because we both knew without his saying it.

"The last thing he said before his face went slack and he passed out was, 'I can't take the idea of someone like that, someone like I'd be, out among regular people. I'll fight it every way I can, but I want you to promise, just in case I lose the fight, that you'll never let *him* stay loose.'

"They did convict him—we both expected it all the way along. Five or six men could have done it, but he was the one with debts and a needy family, the only one with that clear a motive. He got three years, more than his lawyer said it would be. They took him straight from the courtroom to the jail. No grounds for appeal. I got a few letters from him during his sentence. I guess they wouldn't let him send too many. I couldn't tell much from them, not about him at any rate. Not enough to get shook up over, but no reassurances either.

"The first time I learned that he'd gotten out was when a letter I'd sent him came back. Not being a relative or a creditor, they didn't give me his address.

"It was about three, four months later when I finally did see him—accidentally, coming out of a drug store. I almost didn't believe it. I assumed he'd left town, gone back home or something. But more than that, he didn't look the same. I followed him home, only a couple of blocks, trying to make sure it wasn't a mistake. The outlines hadn't changed much, but the soft aura was gone, like the feathers had been emptied out and replaced with buckshot.

"It was him all right, his name on the bell. I hung around in the entranceway, staring at the cracks in the plaster, trying to decide whether to go up and talk to him. Finally I told myself that he had his reasons, and I left. Maybe the truth was that I was as scared of seeing him as he was of seeing me.

"Some time after that, I can't say how long, I got a phone call in the middle of the night. Very quick—I lay there for nearly an

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hour trying to convince myself it had just been the end of a dream. Just two words from a drunken voice, but I knew who it was.

"I didn't sleep that night, or the rest of the day either. By dawn I knew what I was going to do, and how it had to be done. About ten o'clock the next night I went into the back of the crumbling apartment house where he lived. I found a door to the roof, climbed back down the fire escape over the alley. He was lying on the bed watching a little portable TV, with his face half turned away from me. His face, the face I'd known, was gone completely. Just a gray waxy mask was left.

"When I kicked in the window, he rolled off the bed automatically on the opposite side, but he was up and charging by the time I swung through the jagged hole. The mask those three years had welded to his face hypnotized me and I froze, almost too long. That thin painted half-smile had grown, changed into a wide tight-lipped grin.

"As he left his feet in a flying tackle, I whipped the knife out of my sleeve. I don't know if he even saw the long blade before it was deep in his throat.

"The police never found a killer—there were no fingerprints, no witnesses. I don't think they looked too hard, not after they found out he had a record and that he'd sent four guys to the hospital in a bar fight the night before.

"It had to be me who did it—he wasn't built for suicide. Me, not someone else, because I understood why and because I was the only one who had a chance to do it. Remember, it was me who stopped him that first time in the bar, back in college. What I did wasn't a crime, not to him or to me. A tragedy, or a cruel perverse joke, but not a crime. You'd have to see him, see both of him side by side in your mind, one talking to a wide-eyed five-year-old and the other kneeing a screaming man in the face. Then you'd know why I couldn't, why *he* couldn't let the first man die and the second one live.

"I never expected to forget it but I'm almost ashamed at how easily I did. The first weeks after I did it, that knife hilt and his clutching fingers were all I saw, superimposed on everything. Then all of a sudden, nothing. No picture, no memory. Like a billboard you pass on the highway, falling farther and farther behind. Until tonight, when I woke up suddenly in the dark and heard a thick slurring voice say, 'Do it!' "

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DEPARTMENT OF "FIRST STORIES"

This is the 427th "first story" to be published by Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine . . . the chilling, yet sensitive, story of a nurse-housekeeper who specialized in terminals . . .

The author, Jane Windle Paynter, is a housewife in her early fifties. Her three children are now grown and self-sufficient. She wrote us: "After all the reading I can squeeze in, I enjoy singing, gardening, sailing, traveling, and entertaining." She does most of these with her "durable and indulgent husband of more than thirty years." Mrs. Paynter went on: "I dislike paisley designs, herring in sour cream, and cold-weather sports."

And what is perhaps the most interesting quotation from Mrs. Paynter's letter: "I find myself spending more and more time on writing; it is the most challenging, frustrating, exhilarating, depressing, altogether satisfying thing I do."

We have a hunch we'll be reading more about Mrs. Paynter's nurse character . . .

PRACTICAL NURSE

by JANE WINDLE PAYNTER

I'd jump at most any case Dr. Glenn offered, so when he asked me to take on a Mrs. Elliot in 18-A, Surfside Apartments, I said I would. Right off I asked if she'd heard of me. Dr. Glenn said he doubted it. I thought she might of, considering I'd done day work and later everything else for a patient of his in that very apartment building, eight floors down, right up till the day she died. But that was four, five years back, after Dr. Glenn got me through the practical nurse course because I'd showed how good I'd be. Oh, I still do day work for old customers once in a while, but now I'm a nurse who "fills in" with quality housekeeping.

Dr. Glenn called on a Thursday. He said Mrs. Elliot would be home from the hospital soon and the mister wanted to inter-

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view me the next day. I said, "All right," although I didn't see why. When Dr. Glenn recommends me the answer is always yes.

"She is a very sick woman," he said, "and nervous about who is around her. Proceed accordingly."

He didn't have to say that. I can be as quiet as a burglar when need be. On the other hand, my last patient was so depressed about dying that I made myself a ray of sunshine to the very end.

I rang the 18-A bell at 5:45 the next afternoon. Mr. Elliot opened the door and said to come in. He had a drink in one hand and a cigarette in the other. He was a saggy man with a thin line of mustache and three thin lines of hair across his freckled bald spot. He looked as though he hadn't slept for a couple of nights, but that's what a rich life can do. I followed him into the living room and sat on a yellow sofa as he sat opposite on a raspberry-red hassock.

While he sized me up I looked around. I've been in a lot of classy rooms but this one took the cake. It was on the order of that living room in *The Love Machine*. The walls and carpet were white and the puffy chairs and davenports were yellow or raspberry or purple. The tables were glass and chrome and all the paintings were messes of colors except for one which was either a storm coming up or a beached whale. A big window showed the condominium next door. Double glass doors opened onto a terrace on the ocean side.

Mr. Elliot said how Dr. Glenn had recommended me and asked about my experience. I told him mostly the truth. Then he said he understood that I took on a lot of Dr. Glenn's terminal patients, but of course Mrs. Elliot didn't know she was terminal and I wasn't to tell her. The last got my back up but I didn't say anything. I'm not where I am because I'm a blabber. I have to think of everybody's peace of mind and of recommendations for the next case.

While that ran through my head, Mr. Elliot said he was sure I would be fine and would I like to see Mrs. Elliot. That was a surprise because I thought she was still in the hospital, but I didn't bat an eye and just followed him down the hall.

I stopped when I saw into the bedroom. It was all a peach color and to me that shade somehow gives off sort of a rotting smell. I know it's because when I was a little girl on the farm and the first peach crop

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was stored in the shed for sorting, the hot weather would spoil some of the bottom baskets before we got to them. All day we'd handle round firm ripe fruit with the smell of rot in our noses. To this day I can't see peaches but what that smell sickens me.

To make things worse, this room had velvet curtains and a velvet spread that I knew would feel like peach skin. And believe it or not, there was a painting of a peach-colored naked woman, front view, hanging over the bed. Through the bathroom door I could see peach-colored towels and carpeting. I felt so smothery I could of run, but of course I didn't.

I was so busy keeping still and calm-appearing that I didn't notice the woman on the bed until I heard Mr. Elliot introducing us. I went over, careful not to touch the spread, and took a good look. Then I saw why everything was peach. It was to go with her hair. I could tell by her complexion that her hair had been that color and she'd kept it dyed the same shade.

Aside from her hair color, she didn't look too bad in the shaded light, sort of like one of those actresses who is only seen in twilight perfectly made up. Tomorrow I would get a better look and a better idea of how long this job would be. Right now she just nodded for hello and closed her eyes as Mr. Elliot motioned me out. I was glad enough to leave all that peach, I can tell you, but I promised to come back the next day at nine A.M. You can put up with a lot for $42.50 a day.

I got there ten minutes early the next morning so that Mr. Elliot could explain the appliances and her diet and medicine. He did that in the kitchen and, as soon as he'd left, I started checking the things I always check. First, I hunted for the whiskey and couldn't find it. But I did spot a locked cupboard and took that for a sign of Mrs. Elliot's trouble. Not always, you understand. Sometimes the family just doesn't trust the help.

The next thing I studied were the pill labels. There was one for pain I'd given my last patient that had worked real good until towards the end. Then there was what my aunt calls a "peace pill." The rest I didn't recognize. I couldn't make anything of the food list. I knew I'd just have to wait and see. Since there wasn't a sound from the bedroom, I rinsed Mr. Elliot's breakfast dishes, put them in the dishwasher, and looked for a cloth that would do for dusting.

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But when I went into the living room I couldn't see where to start. There wasn't a speck of dust or a fluff of lint anywhere. I thought I might as well try the terrace—maybe a shower had left dust rings. I opened the door and stepped out. And just stood there, staring.

The sun was well up, of course, but the night fog hadn't burned off and the sun struck through it like the light of Heaven. You wouldn't have known the ocean was below except for its shushing sound. The sea smell made me think of the world's first day. By leaning over I saw that the fog came up to about the fifteenth floor. Looking down at that giant tinted cloud I half expected to see an angel sitting on it.

"Hello." I knew it was Mrs. Elliot, but I jumped anyway. "I'm sorry I startled you," she said. She was standing there in a beige lace robe gripping the sides of the doorway as though to keep the breeze from carrying her off. It just about could of, she was that thin. And not only thin but tiny. I judged she was half my weight and I'm not that heavy for five nine.

I asked if she wanted breakfast. She said she'd had plenty. She would be up for a while, she said. She asked me to sit down beside her and I saw she wanted to talk. I was glad of a chance to start deciding what had to be done, so right out I asked about her family.

"Mr. Elliot and I have no children," she said, "but I have a daughter from a previous marriage. If there's a long distance call, that's probably who it will be. Any other calls, please let me decide whether I want to talk. It tires me so." She shook her head. "I doubt if anybody will call. I've been in the hospital for a month and we haven't lived here long enough to make friends—only six months."

I thought how everything but the color of their underwear, and in some cases even that, was talked about any newcomer to our block within twenty-four hours after they landed. You could take that for nosiness, but on the other hand it's a comfort to have somebody caring if only out of curiosity. I couldn't think of a good remark, but that was all right because I saw she wanted to go on.

"I'm out of the hospital on trial. I can stay home as long as I observe the rule. I'm sure Dr. Glenn told you what it is."

"No," I said.

She looked surprised. "I guess he wants me to tell you. I'm an alcoholic."

After she said that, she ran her tongue around her lips and

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swallowed so hard the effort closed her eyes. I had the feeling she had seldom owned up aloud. Sure enough, a minute later she went on, "I don't know why, but I don't mind you knowing. I feel you'll really help me."

"Right now I'm going to help you to bed," I said in my no-back-talk voice. She had suddenly gone grayish pale. She didn't argue when I hoisted her up and steered her to her peach bed.

"Now that I've told you the trouble, we'll be open and frank," she said. "I need a friend."

"You have me," I said. But I didn't know yet what direction my friendship would take.

She slept then, and again after a sparrow's lunch. I watched TV in the den with some crocheting during the commercials. Through the doorway I could see whenever she stirred. I felt easy in the den which was furnished in honest wood and leather and had a roughish wool carpet and shelves full of books. I thought I might try one, but when I couldn't find a Jacqueline Susann. I gave up and stuck to TV.

The next three days were about the same. I came early, neatened everything, fixed her lunch and mine, phoned for groceries, counted out her pills. I was surprised she didn't start looking better, or at least not worse, especially since she was staying in bed most of the day, which Dr. Glenn called to make sure she was doing. On nice afternoons she loved to be on the terrace and watch the sea. Lying down, she couldn't see more than the horizon, but she seemed satisfied. Once, when I went out with her broth, she said, "There's nothing to be frightened of, is there?" To humor her I said there wasn't.

She switched off her bedside phone every afternoon while she took her nap, so when she woke up she would have to ask if her daughter had called and I would have to say she hadn't. I thought the daughter had maybe called the day before I came, but when Mrs. Elliot broke out crying after a week of asking, I guessed the worst. I didn't ask but sure enough, after I patted her shoulder till her crying slowed down, she said, "She won't call. She said she wouldn't. She went off with a guru and his disciples before we moved here. She could find us through our old neighbors, but I know she'll never try."

I didn't want to say it. It just came out. "You have your husband."

She didn't answer. In fact, if I hadn't heard my own words, I

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couldn't have told I said them. She tried to straighten her hunched little shoulders and said she would take a bath and then have a cup of tea on the terrace. Later, when I brought it, I saw that the hand she raised was so frail that the light almost showed through, like it will through real bone china. I decided I would have to call Dr. Glenn.

"She's worse," I said to him on my home phone that night. "She's going downhill and not through my fault. I've given her every pill and cooked every meal she doesn't eat. So don't blame me for whatever happens."

"Do your best," Dr. Glenn said in that kind way that makes him so good with terminals. "She begged me not to put her back in the hospital, so we'll try to keep her at home. I think it will be possible although you never know with a cirrhosis."

There! He'd said it without me even asking. He'd once explained that he doesn't tell all his home nurses the ailment so they won't be tempted to improvise. Of course I had thought cirrhosis all along, but a bad tumor can act the same. There's not much choice between the two is my observation although those tumors can let up with x-ray treatments but nothing on God's earth can slow down a cirrhosis.

So I got ready for Mr. Elliot to ask me to stay around the clock and at the end of two weeks he had to because she could hardly get out of bed. Then I had the two of them to cook for, but considering the pay I didn't mind.

"How is she?" Mr. Elliot would ask when he came in every night, like I was nursing his sick pet dog. When I said she was the same he would go to the den, unlock the liquor, and start in on it. I would have thought he wouldn't have the nerve to drink in front of her, but he would take his glass right along if he decided to pay her a five-minute visit.

The rest of the time before and after dinner it was more drinks with reading or TV. But by then I'll have to admit it didn't matter because she hardly had the strength to talk.

I try not to get too fond of my terminals, but sometimes, like in Mrs. Elliot's case, I'm all they have. Families can get so worn out with waiting for the end that they let slip how the illness is hindering them from this or that. Or, like Mr. Elliot, they don't go out of their way to be considerate.

Now, not all my terminals' relatives are that way. Some go plain haywire with grieving.

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One man killed himself when his wife died and most of them cry plenty. The kin of Mr. Elliot's type are the exceptions, but they're the ones you remember.

I was doing for Mrs. Elliot like a baby now—baths, bedpans, the works. Dr. Glenn tried a new pill on her and it made her throw up. I called and told him and he said, well, he had a last-resort pill which might even prolong her life. I told him there was no kindness in that.

When he came the next day he saw I was right. Mrs. Elliot could hardly lift her hand and she looked so puny lying in that giant bed that I suddenly saw what had really bothered me that first day. All that peach velvet now struck me exactly like the inside of a coffin and it was the perfect color for hers. I got around behind Dr. Glenn while he counted her pulse so she couldn't read my thoughts.

After he left, I was feeding her some weak tea and, for something to do between her sips, I studied the portrait of the peach-colored lady over the bed. She noticed what I was doing and said, "It doesn't look like me any more, does it?"

I had to admit it didn't. Then she asked for the hand mirror and when I held it up she studied herself for a long time. A sort of contentment came into her eyes. You wouldn't believe she could feel that way, but I swear that's what I saw.

When Mr. Elliot visited her that day they had a talk with the door closed. That night she had her best sleep in a week. Several times I had to lean close to be sure it *was* sleep; but in the morning she was a little brighter, even ate a smitch of toast, and wanted me to brush her hair and find her lipstick. I gave her a little kidding about why she was dolling up and she smiled and said, "I decided something yesterday and I feel like celebrating. Besides, I'm expecting a present."

After her bath she begged to be helped to the terrace. The fog was in but the sun was over it. In the bright light I could see white creeping around the edge of her hair. I wished I'd combed it over.

Around ten the doorbell rang. A delivery man was there with a parcel. I took it to her and she said to undo it. I tore off the brown paper and I guess you know what it was—a fifth of Chivas Regal.

Before I thought about it, I hid it behind me. She didn't change expression but she never took her eyes off mine and she never so much as blinked as she stretched out her

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hand. Neither of us said anything for a long time.

"Please," she said finally. "You know it's best for me to go."

I still had the bottle behind me.

"I can't go the way I want to unless you help," she said.

I had a lot of thoughts about running to the phone and calling Dr. Glenn or throwing the bottle over the railing or yelling as loud as I could before the right thing came to me.

"How do you like it?" I asked.

"Just ice."

I got a tumbler, opened the bottle, and poured some into the glass. "More," she said and I added some. She brought the glass to her lips with both hands and drank like she'd been in a desert for a long time. I sat watching the pink come to her cheeks.

She had only two drinks, but they were big ones. She drank them fast; then I saw she was struggling to get up. I took her arm and helped, thinking that the drinking was over this first time, and she wanted to go back to bed.

But she pulled toward the railing and we both looked down at the peach-colored cloud which was as soft-looking as her bedcover. I was about to say so when I saw she had a foot over the railing. I grabbed her waist but she said, "No! Let me!" And well, I did.

So that's what happened to Mrs. Elliot. And some of the others.

"O"

CURRENT MYSTERY AND SUSPENSE HARDCOVERS

AUTHOR	TITLE	PUBLISHER	PRICE	ON SALE
Crowe, John	CROOKED SHADOWS	Dodd, Mead	$5.95	5/12
Femling, Jean	BACKYARD	Harper & Row	6.95	5/28
Gilbert, Harriett	AN OFFENSE AGAINST THE PERSONS	Harper & Row	6.95	5/21
Price, Anthony	OTHER PATHS TO GLORY	Doubleday & Co., Inc.	5.95	5/23
Thomson, June	THE LONG REVENGE	Doubleday & Co., Inc.	4.95	5/2
Wren, M. K.	A MULTITUDE OF SINS	Doubleday & Co., Inc.	4.95	5/16

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DEPARTMENT OF SECOND STORIES

We published Charlene Weir's first story, "From the Fear of Our Enemies," in the April 1968 issue of EQMM, more than seven years ago—a much longer than usual period between first and second stories; and we can only hope that Mrs. Weir's third story will take far less time to appear in print.

Mrs. Weir's second story is very different from her first—which is as it should be. And we are confident her third story will be very different again. Mrs. Weir, we recall, is a registered nurse, and sooner or later her nursing experiences will take the shape of stories—for, as we have said before, nursing and detecting can easily go hand in hand . . .

THE REPLACEMENT

by CHARLENE WEIR

Three and one-half more days, counting today. Frank Slattery groped in the back of the drawer for the loose paper clips and tossed them into his briefcase. With a vicious slap he sent the metal desk drawer flying shut. It hit with a hollow thud and Maggie stopped typing to look at him. Her round face held no expression, but Frank felt the dislike as her cold gray eyes flicked over him. She was an excellent secretary, the best in his 25 years as a vice president. But she was the only thing he wouldn't miss.

Her large square hands resumed tapping keys and when she turned her head, Frank stared at the gray streaks in her brown hair. He wondered if she felt any regret at all that he was leaving.

Forty-six years he had worked for this company. More than two-thirds of his life. At the end of the week his desk would be empty and he would be expected simply to walk out. Retire. The feeling of grievance that had been building up in him over the last few months suddenly exploded into rage.

Abruptly he left his desk and went down the hallway to the

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president's office. The receptionist tipped back her doll face and opened her mouth. She was shiny and bright to match the rest of the plastic and chrome in the suite.

When old Joe Minnetti was president these offices were all dark walnut and leather and gave off a sense of good solid worth. Not cheap tinsel the way it was now. Frank ignored the silvery, tinkling voice wanting to help him. He went past her to the door, shoved it out of his way, and almost shouted, "Harmon!"

He stopped, slightly embarrassed, at seeing the woman seated in front of the desk. He crossed his arms, trapping a bony hand under each armpit. "Sorry, I didn't know you were busy."

Harmon Prescott sighed. Annoyance flickered briefly in the blue eyes behind tinted glasses. When he spoke it was to the woman. "I'll talk to you later, Marla."

She nodded and stood up. She was tall with long dark hair and an oval face. Young, probably in her early thirties. She gave Frank a shrewd look from dark, intelligent eyes.

He glared at her back as she left. She might be pretty, but she was just the sort of woman Frank disliked. She wore pants and walked with long strides as if there was nothing she couldn't do.

"Frank, you've been told so many times to knock first. Would you try to remember it, please?" Harmon carefully fitted a cigarette into a holder with slender well-manicured hands. His brown curly hair was just long enough to brush against the velvet collar of his jacket. "At least, sit down," he said blowing smoke at the ceiling.

A wave of revulsion swept over Frank as he brushed the nameplate out of the way and gripped the edge of the glass-topped desk. "I have been the head killer around here for over twenty-five years."

Harmon's full mouth curled with distaste. "Frank, I will not—"

"All right, all right. Head killer isn't classy enough these days. Vice-president in charge of divestment." He leaned forward pointing his long nose at the president's face. "It doesn't matter. It's all the same anyway. What I want to know is, why am I being forced to retire?"

Harmon studied the end of his cigarette, then delicately shaved off the ashes. "You were sixty-five last month and—"

Frank slapped the desk with the palm of his hand. "What the hell difference does that

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make? Just because a man reaches sixty-five doesn't mean he can't do his job any more."

"The company rule is retirement at sixty-five. There's nothing I can do about it."

"Why? Damn it, why? I'm still as good as I ever was." Frank held out one hand, fingers spread. "Look at that. Steady as a rock." The fingers quivered and Frank jammed them in his pocket. It wasn't old age, it was simply because he was so furious.

"You've always known retirement was compulsory at sixty-five."

"Yes, but there's no reason for it. Not in my case. Look here, Harmon. During my term I've killed 163 people. Successfully. Not a smell of trouble about any of them. That's not even counting all the jobs I supervised for the boys working under me. Every one of them done right. Not one failure."

"Oh?" Harmon twisted the large ring on his little finger. "I seem to recall there was an airplane. Twenty-eight unmarked people killed. What was that? A bonus?"

Frank dropped into the chrome and vinyl chair in front of the desk. "I might know you'd bring that up. It was an accident. I explained the whole thing. Outside of that, my record is perfect. Admit it."

Leaning back in his chair, Harmon smiled—a plastic, condescending smile that Frank itched to smash.

"I'm sorry, Frank. There's nothing I can do. It's not just your age. Some of the members of the board feel that you're getting a little slow and that your methods are somewhat outdated."

"Outdated? What the hell does that mean? I've never known one of them to want particulars about any job. The only thing they're interested in is results. And results is what I've given them."

"Things are changing. Nothing is being done any more the way it used to be. You have no idea of the pressures involved in being in business today. It's not like the old days. Everything is complicated now. Employees are striking for higher wages. Minority groups are picketing because of unfair hiring practices. Clients are trying to get jobs below cost.

"If we're going to keep this business operating at a profit we've got to think about all these things. The minority groups, for instance. They're making so much noise these days, we're forced to hire some of them. Whether we want to or not. And it's the same thing with retirement age. We've simply got to—"

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"Wait just a minute. What do you mean minority groups? Are you trying to tell me some guy from a minority group is going to get my job?"

"I didn't say that. All I'm saying is the board feels it's time for someone younger to take your place. Somebody a little more flexible, with modern ideas. I don't know what you're so upset about. You'll be getting the full monthly retirement pay. Good lord, Frank, you act like it's the end of the world!"

"It might as well be, for me. My whole life has been my work. What's left if you take that away?" Frank hated himself for the sticky pity in his throat.

He was aware of the irritation in his boss, and aware that Harmon's glance was straying toward the papers on his desk.

Fury churned in Frank's narrow chest, then rose in his throat until it choked him. After all these years and everything he'd done, Harmon didn't feel any more for him than impatience. Like he was some damn secretary with a problem about the coffee pot. "I want you to convince the board members that I should stay on my job."

Harmon carefully crushed his cigarette in the ashtray. "You know I'd do anything to help you. But it's a rule. Rules are made for the good of the company."

"I'm asking you to change the rule."

"I can't do that."

"Why?"

"Look, Frank, I've got work to do."

"Damn it, you're treating me like some punk office boy! I've held an important position in this company and I demand to be treated with respect."

"All right," Harmon said. "If you want it straight, here it is. I won't make any attempt to change the rule because I don't want you to stay on. I feel your retirement is in the best interests of the company. Your replacement has already been chosen."

"Why so soon? Shouldn't I be staying on to train the new man?"

"That won't be necessary. The fact is, you have certain prejudices that would get in the way. Besides, no training is needed in this case. You're scheduled to leave on Friday and that's the way it has to be. The board wants the new vice-president in charge of divestment to start on Monday."

Harmon glanced at his watch. "I'm sorry, but that's the way it is. Is there anything else?"

"That's it then? I'm supposed

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to leave at the end of the week?"

"I'm sorry, Frank. That's it."

"I see. In that case I'll take the rest of the day off. If you have no objection."

"Go right ahead. A little preview taste of freedom." Harmon was reaching for the papers on his desk before Frank even got out the door.

Hot rage poured into Frank's brain like black tar. He blundered out of the office and stumbled against a man waiting outside. The man caught Frank's elbow in strong fingers to steady him.

"Take it easy, old man. You might hurt yourself." He looked at Frank with amusement.

He was a young man with wild hair and a narrow mustache. He wore a yellow shirt with lace around the cuffs and red pants. Lace, for Pete's sake! Frank jerked his arm away in disgust.

The man showed a flash of white teeth in a sneering smile, then went into Harmon's office.

Arrogant punk. Frank went down the hallway and told Maggie he wouldn't be in for the rest of the afternoon. He left the office building with his head throbbing dully as if someone had hammered on it with a sand-filled sock. At the corner he turned left and walked toward Sixth Street.

There was nothing he could do. He was going to have to retire. Smog hung in the air covering the city with a greasy gray film. Each breath coated his lungs with it and his mouth tasted of exhaust fumes. It used to be ambition and drive and quality of performance that were important. And a man worked hard to get ahead. Now it was all show. All fancy clothes and youth.

Frank walked slowly with dragging feet. There didn't seem any real reason to go home to his empty apartment. He sat on a bench and watched the buses lumber to the curb, engulf passengers, then belch and trundle off. A twinge of pain went through his right knee and he massaged it absently.

He had done his job well. Only once in his entire career did he make a mistake and that was an accident. The target unexpectedly got on an airplane carrying the suitcase with the explosive, instead of driving as he was supposed to. Frank had to go to a special committee meeting and explain. But everybody admitted it wasn't his fault, it couldn't have been helped.

On Monday a new man would sit at Frank's desk and take over Frank's job. It was all

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finished for Frank. He could sit on a bench for the rest of his life and it wouldn't matter. What was he like, this new man? Would he—

Suddenly Frank knew who his replacement was. That lace-cuffed punk waiting outside Harmon's office.

"No!" Frank pounded the bench with his fist. A man waiting for the bus gave him an odd look.

Frank walked rapidly to the parking lot. He wouldn't allow it. The replacement was only a kid!

There was one last job Frank would do before retiring. Remove his replacement. He got his car and parked it out on the street where it would be handy. Then he went back to the office. Riding up in the elevator he hoped the guy was still in Harmon's office.

The receptionist tucked a strand of blonde hair behind one ear and gave him a questioning look.

"Hi, Valerie. Harmon busy?" Frank asked. "I just remembered there was something else I want to ask him."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Slattery," she cooed. "But, yes, he is busy. Would you care to wait?"

"Is he still talking to the new man? I forgot his name."

"Hunnicutt, Richard Hunnicutt. Yes, he is. I don't know how much longer they'll be."

"That's all right," Frank said. "I'll see Harmon tomorrow." Should he take the chance of asking where Hunnicutt lived? He decided against it. Even as dumb as Valerie was she might wonder why he was asking.

He left the building and went across the street to wait. Most of the employees left in clumps shortly after five o'clock. The rest of them straggled out one by one a few minutes later. But still Hunnicutt didn't come out.

Frank began to get restless. What was the guy doing so long? Finally Hunnicutt came out and went to the parking lot. Frank snorted when he saw Hunnicutt get into a bright red sports car. Stupid sort of car to drive. It could be followed with no problem.

Frank trotted to his own car and when Hunnicutt came out of the parking lot, Frank let another car get between them, and then he swung out to follow.

He trailed for several miles before he discovered where Hunnicutt was going. But Frank followed a few more miles just to be sure. Hunnicutt was going to the cabin that the company owned. Then Frank went home.

In his apartment he unlocked the bottom desk drawer and took out his gun. He checked it

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to make sure it was fully loaded, then dropped it in his pocket. He sat in the old leather armchair to wait. When the phone rang he picked it up, irritated at the interruption.

"It's Maggie, Mr. Slattery. A message just came for you."

"What is it?" With only three working days left he wasn't going to do any more favors for Harmon Prescott.

"Richard Hunnicutt," Maggie was saying. "He's at the cabin because he's still looking for a place to live. About eleven o'clock."

"What?" Frank was startled into paying attention. "What was that?"

"You're to be at the cabin at eleven tonight to talk with Richard Hunnicutt," Maggie said sharply.

"Hunnicutt? Why am I supposed to talk to him?"

"I'm just giving you the message."

Frank sucked in a deep breath and a wide smile stretched his thin lips. He needn't have bothered to follow Hunnicutt.

After a three-hour drive Frank turned off the main road and drove slowly along the gravel path that led to the cabin. It was actually a modern three-bedroom house. It was called a cabin simply because it was surrounded by acres of trees and was close to a secluded lake.

Frank parked a quarter of a mile away and walked on the weeds along the shoulder, avoiding the gravel which crunched sharply under his shoes. Shrubbery snagged his jacket and periodically he had to duck because of low-hanging branches. It was just after nine o'clock.

When he reached the house he waited, listening. A light wind breathed through the trees creating a slight motion that was felt rather than seen. Sounds were all around him in the dark—leaves brushing together, branches creaking softly, small animals scurrying in the night.

The porch light was on and one dim light inside the house. It looked as if Hunnicutt had gone out. The garage sat several yards behind the house and the door was closed. Frank didn't know if there was a car inside. A dull ache stiffened the muscles in his shoulders and suddenly he felt tired.

Tossing away the lessons of years of experience, Frank walked boldly to the door. If the punk wasn't home it didn't matter. But if Hunnicutt opened the door a single bullet through the heart would do the trick.

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Frank's right hand slipped into his pocket and closed around the gun. He rang the doorbell.

A high-pitched whine broke the stillness and a bullet struck the wooden door with a splintering smack. Frank dropped and rolled lightly off the edge of the porch. He crouched against the cold bricks. A momentary shock of surprise ran through his mind. Hunnicutt had been waiting for him! Blood tingled in Frank's body and hummed in his ears. Every nerve was tensed, alert and ready. He fired a single shot and the light on the porch went out in a shower of glass slivers.

Tension and pleasure sent confidence coursing through his whole being. There were no aches or pains now. His reflexes were sure and quick and his muscles eager to respond. He continued to hold himself motionless while he listened. He sniffed the air and his eyes searched the darkness. They picked out a brief flash of pale color that was gone almost instantly.

Yellow lace cuffs weren't advisable if you didn't want to be seen.

A twig snapped. Frank grinned. Hunnicutt was young. Impatience had betrayed his location. Now Frank knew Hunnicutt was at the northeast corner of the garage.

With infinite care Frank eased away from the brick porch and made his way slowly around the corner of the house. Feeling cautiously with his foot, Frank located a small stone. Deliberately he let his foot slither softly across it. He listened, then drew in a quick breath of satisfaction.

Hunnicutt had heard. Frank could follow his slow movement around the corner of the garage, then his diagonal approach toward the house. The sounds were barely audible.

The kid was good, Frank thought grudgingly. A few years of experience and he might even be super. Frank felt a moment of regret at what he intended to do.

Then Frank moved again, quickly. He wanted to give the impression of fear and haste. For what he had in mind he needed to go completely around the house with Hunnicutt close on his heels.

The only dangerous spot was the window on the south side of the house where the dim light inside filtered out with a feeble glow. Frank ran past the window. Speed was essential here and a little luck that Hunnicutt wasn't too close behind.

Once past the window, Frank crouched low and moved si-

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lently toward the garage. Then he waited. A few seconds later he heard Hunnicutt moving rapidly toward the lighted window.

At just the right moment Frank gave a shout of triumph. Filled with the heady sense of success he jumped up, silhouetting his dark shape against the lighter hue of the garage door. He squeezed the trigger of his gun.

In the end it was age that betrayed him. He meant to fire and jump swiftly to one side. But instead of pushing him easily to safety, his right knee collapsed and he sprawled helplessly.

Hunnicutt had time for one shot before he went down. The bullet tore into Frank's belly with a burst of white pain. Frank cursed the pain and his own stupidity. With victory in his grasp he had thrown it away by a grandstand play.

Clutching his stomach, he felt the warm sticky blood ooze through his fingers. He pulled himself along the ground toward Hunnicutt. Frank had to be sure. But it was wasted energy. Hunnicutt was dead. There was a neat hole in his forehead just to the left of center.

Frank gave a moan of anguish. He had come so close. He was beginning to feel weak as darkness gathered around the edges of his mind. How bad was it? If he got help would be have a chance? Cold fear told him no matter how soon help came it would be too late. But he had to try. A telephone. If he could just get into the house. It seemed so far away.

His leaden body twisted in agony as Frank inched himself toward the house. He went five yards. Then he could force himself no farther. His head was heavy and he let it drop. Sharp pieces of gravel bit into his cheek. It was very quiet. Almost peaceful. He lay there waiting for the darkness to fill his mind.

Then he heard something. An approaching car.

In a few seconds headlights swept over him. His heart leaped with a wild surge of hope. A chuckle bubbled in his throat. Somebody had come. He had won!

A young woman got out of the car and walked cautiously toward him.

"Help me," he said. "Hurry. An accident—"

The woman stood looking down at him. "Sorry, Frank. If by some miracle you pulled through you'd just try again. I underestimated you. I thought Hunnicutt could handle it."

Frank looked up at her, squinting his eyes against the

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glare of the headlights. She had blonde hair and a doll face.

She nodded as though she knew his thoughts. "It's me, Valerie Meadows. I knew what you wanted when you came back to the office this afternoon. I told Maggie to call and give you that message. Couldn't you tell that we were the same kind of people, Frank, you and I?"

"Maggie wouldn't—" Frank struggled to hang onto his thoughts. But they kept slipping away into the darkness in his mind.

She smiled gently. "Maggie works for me now. I'm your replacement."

"Q"

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No, the deeper we got into it, the more it reminded us of Happy, Dopey, Doc, Sneezy, Sleepy, Grumpy, and Bashful—in its sui generis way. For here you will also meet a group of seven characters—Pappy, Doughboy, Doc, Ah Choo, Sandman, Grundig, and Shyster—as forlorn a group of geezers as ever inhabited a detective story. Yes, you are about to read a 'tec takeoff of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and you've never read anything remotely like it in all the annals of mystery fiction. Surreal, man, out of this world . . . .

BIANCA AND THE SEVEN SLEUTHS

by JAMES POWELL

The neighborhood around the Grimbros Building looks as if the postman delivers hand grenades. And for all the mail I get, maybe he does. The glass in my door reads: *Aardvark Investigations.* Aardvark, as I'm always having to explain, isn't my name. Many years ago I thought it was using my noodle to be the first private detective listed in the phone book.

Except for Doc Dvorak who wishes he was a private eye, we are all detectives on my floor. So it was no big surprise to find forlorn old Grimbros in his white bib overalls lettering a new door. It read: *The Vegetarian Detective Agency.* Later when the kid—all denim, patches, and hair tied back with a headband—passed by my open door carrying a mint

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Westport Correspondence School of Detection diploma in a frame, I gave him a modest wave of welcome.

"The more the merrier, kid," I said. "But where in hell did you dig up that name?"

"My generation believes we all have to you know stand for something, Mr. Aardvark," he replied earnestly and made a fist salute.

"What say you call me Pappy, kid?" I asked, feeling very tired.

Well, who among us can resist youth's high moral tone? Certainly not a bunch of has-been private eyes with time heavy on their hands and a lifetime's supply of tried-and-true experiences burning holes in their pockets. The kid quickly became a kind of floor project. Grundig of *Bulldog Surveillance*, scowling from varicose veins, gave him street lessons in tailing; Shyster Hanlon, so called because he'd been a lawyer until disbarred for addressing a jury through a megaphone in the manner of his hero Rudy Vallee, taught the kid the fine points of divorce cases, like how to operate the flash camera; Doughboy Tanner, my next-door neighbor, revealed the footwork secrets that won him the bare-knuckles championship of the American Expeditionary Forces.

The rest of us contributed variously according to our abilities. Doc Dvorak even chipped in with free dental work. For his part the kid made it plain, as kindly as he could, that he considered tailing a violation of privacy, that he would handle divorce work by marriage counseling, in which he was taking a course at night school along with a first-aid course in case he was ever obliged to injure a living thing.

Well, that was the kid. But beggars can't be choosers and he was all we had. As the weeks passed we grew anxious, wondering if he'd ever get his first case.

It was a bit after nine in the evening and Doughboy and I were playing cribbage when the clash of the elevator grille made us perk up our ears. Doughboy poised his old bones, set to pop back into his office by way of the fire escape if the clacking heels stopped at his door. I slipped in my dentures in case the heels stopped at mine. When they didn't, we opened the door a crack.

What, I wondered, would bring this young thing and her casually well-dressed clothes to these rundown halls? Across the way at *Celestial Investigations* our portly, panama-hatted, and inscrutable colleague

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whom, in Bret Harte's memory, we have nicknamed Ah Choo, was nodding his approval of her trim figure.

She continued on past *Sandman Security* ("We never Sleep"), past Doc Dvorak's where a momentary hesitation made our hearts sink, past Grundig, whose ivory dome and lilac jowls were thrust out into the hall as he watched her go by. When she knocked on the kid's door you could hear the grin in his "Come in," which meant he was smoking one of his thick roll-your-owns.

We all came stealthily down the hall. I rousted out Sandman and then helped him, still stiff from dozing in his chair, to stand up in the stirrup of Doughboy's gnarled hands. Sandman unhooked his vest-pocket hearing aid, doled out the wire, and lowered the apparatus through the kid's transom. Down on the floor again, Sandman adjusted his ear plug and tuned us in on a rather one-sided conversation.

"Here's the thing," Bianca—it turned out she was Bianca Whitney, daughter of the notorious hypochondriac and multimillionaire—was saying, "I publish *Organic Eateries,* a gourmet guide to health-food restaurants. Maybe you've heard of it. Anyway, as I was walking to work this morning, this armored car drove by, the door popped open, and out fell a canvas bag with a big dollar sign on it. Well, I thought, this looks like my lucky day. But when I went to pick it up a paddy-green Rolls-Royce bolted from the curb and tried to run me down."

"Wow!" said the kid, starting to work his way out of the grin.

"What saved me were reflexes unpoisoned by chemical additives and preservatives," insisted Bianca. "Okay, that was this morning. Then, this afternoon there I was leaning out my office window talking to Mr. Mukerji of Karma Real Estate and Development next door when this same paddy-green Rolls pulled up down the street. Just then the phone rang. The Chez Aubergine people wanted to protest my busting them from four crossed carrots to three. I pride myself in being fair and they do too put too much oregano in their mock gigot.

"Anyway, while I was standing my ground I heard a step in the hall and, plop, somebody pushed a king cobra through my letter slot. Fear rooted me to the floor. Terror gripped me by the throat. I watched in horror as the deadly serpent slithered towards me. Suddenly, Sabu, Mr. Mukerji's pet mongoose, popped in through the

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window to beg for a candied macadamia nut and that was the end of Mr. Cobra."

The kid wowed gravely.

"Then, this evening," continued Binaca, "my father's chauffeur and bodyguard, a man named Hunter, phoned, begging me to meet him at The Black Forest, a grungy night-spot on the West Side. Hunter's been with the family for years and ordinarily I'd have gone without a second thought. But strange things are going on. I mean, I'm not accusing Hunter of anything, but one of Father's Rolls-Royces is paddy-green. So I thought I'd hire someone to go along with me and maybe look into things. The Vegetarian Detective Agency caught my eye in the book. You sounded like my kind of people."

Suddenly Sandman was hauling in the hearing-aid wire. "They're coming," he whispered. But there was no hurry. I had sold the kid one of my old trenchcoats to wear on the job, arguing that private eyes in jeans and workshirts were as underhanded as unmarked police cars. The coat was a complicated affair—all belts, straps, flaps, and buckles. I knew it would take him five minutes to put it on.

By the time he and Bianca got out into the hall, all of us, including Doc whose wallet we would need, were crowded into the elevator. We couldn't let the kid go off on his first case alone. Grimbros, looking melancholy and unmilitary in his oversized elevator-operator's uniform, held the door and said, "Going down."

As we descended the kid looked around uneasily before deciding that our being there was just happy chance. To fill us in on the big news he said, "Mostly, Miss Whitney, I only take cases involving like you know civil-rights violations and the polluting of the environment."

"Wow!" said Bianca admiringly.

When we hit the lobby the kid and Bianca strode away from us and out the door, passing Shyster Hanlon who was coming in. "Heigh ho, everybody," said Shyster. "Heigh ho, heigh ho, Shyster," we replied and signaled him to fall in with us. This was a bit of luck. Shyster moonlighted as an Aphrodite man, a driver for the Harlem diaper service of that name. Leaving the kid and his client trying to hail a cab, the seven of us were able to troop into Shyster's step-van at the curb.

"Has he made the pass yet?" asked Shyster as we set off for The Black Forest. The ethics of making the pass before solving

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the case is a much disputed point in our profession. Shyster's idiot leer, which he always dresses up by holding a cigarette between his yellow teeth, left no doubt where he stood.

From the street The Black Forest looked like a haunted cuckoo clock. The gloomy interior, walled round with the stuffed heads of stag and boar, looked more like a furnished clearing in a deep wood. We marched in like a class reunion, all noise and high jinks. That was Shyster's idea, which involved singing "The Whiffenpoof Song."

Hunter was easy enough to spot in his dove-gray chauffeur's cap and his sunglasses. He didn't much care for us crowding down at the table next to his but we had him outnumbered. The animals on the walls seemed to stir and glance as if to say, "The plot thickens."

After two or three minutes Hunter jumped up and shoved his cap under his elbow. Bianca and the kid were approaching his table. When they had all sat down Hunter said, "First off, Miss Bianca, I wouldn't take my job back on a bet. That's not why I asked you here."

"You've quit? Since when?" asked Bianca.

"Fired," said Hunter. "Since last week when I told your stepmother that gathering her herbs by moonlight wasn't part of my job."

"Lorelei, my stepmother, is a staunch advocate of healthy natural ingedients," explained Bianca to the kid.

"Healthy for her maybe," said Hunter. "You try Central Park at night with a wicker basket hooked to your arm scrounging for eye-bright, dwarf elder, brooklime, and all that crazy stuff by south-flowing water. I had to pistol-whip my way out of many a tight corner. But that's all over and done with now. I just wanted to warn you: the day I left I surprised your stepmother putting pickled newt's eye into your daddy's food."

Bianca smiled brightly. "When you think of the poisons we eat, newt's eye sounds positively nourishing." She added a short discourse on the contents of the hot dog that left us all queasy.

"But I hear your daddy broke out in a rash," argued Hunter.

"I spoke to him yesterday. On the phone," said Bianca, explaining, "I guess I'm just not up to all that decontamination business he expects of visitors. Anyway, Lorelei's put him on a diet that's clearing up the rash like a charm. So please don't

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tell me she's trying to poison him, Hunter. I've got other things on my mind." And she described the day's events.

After a thoughtful pause Hunter said, "She hates you, Miss Bianca. Ever since that big argument you two had about her unjust treatment of the help. Yes, she does. Listen, later that same day I was playing cards with your daddy. Lorelei was there too, standing in front of that red painting she likes so much."

"The Miro?"

Hunter nodded. "She was standing in front of the Miro on the wall while your daddy was taking your part and she said, 'You always said I was the fairest person ever.' 'Well, I always thought you were,' answered your daddy, 'but Bianca's fairer than you are,' too busy sneaking a peek at my cards to see the effect of his words. Miss Bianca, your stepmother's face was contorted with hate."

Hunter pounded the table. "I'll tell you who's trying to kill you!" At our table six heads tilted as one, six because Sandman's chin was slumbering on his chest. "It's—"

He was interrupted by a loud burst of guitar and castanets. The violent strumming and clatter were quickly reinforced by a Spanish tenor's nasal complaint and the guttural sound of an ancient wind-up phonograph which had appeared on a table by the door. A woman masked in a mantilla emerged from the shadows with much stamping of heels.

"This has got cover charge written all over it," mourned Doc, staring into the slit of his wallet. Just then the kid saw us for the first time. His jaw came unslung and his nostrils whitened indignantly. Then he snapped his mouth shut and turned back to the dancer.

When the last stamp, clap, and strum had sounded, the dancer acknowledged our polite *ole*s by slipping on a leather glove, picking up a rose from inside the phonograph case, and tossing it playfully toward Bianca. But the throw was high. Hunter came half out of his seat to catch the flower and then sat back down heavily. When I looked toward the door again, the dancer was gone.

"If you were about to accuse Lorelei, please save your breath, Hunter," admonished Bianca. "Just because she's a stepmother doesn't make her wicked. That's prejudice, Hunter, and you do well to hang your head." She was still scolding when, catching the kid's eye, I led him and the boys into the Men's Room.

"Don't think I'm you know ungrateful," pleaded the kid,

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looking around at us. "I mean like for all the neat pointers and what have you. But like I've got to run my first case myself."

"She's out there talking to a dead man, kid," said Shyster.

"I'd say curare," opined Doc.

Ah Choo observed, "Fools may ask if the thorn is the rose's protector or the rose the thorn's lure, but then a fool's tongue has no thumb."

"Kid," I said, "I'll bet your plan is to get the girl home safe and then to check out the stepmother business, right?" It was the kid's first dead body and he showed it in the gills. But he mustered an affirmative squeak.

Bianca would end up believing she left behind a Hunter too contrite to even say goodbye.

Bianca's basement apartment had its own front entrance under the brownstone steps. We parked across the street until the kid had escorted her out of the taxi and inside the apartment. The boys then trooped around the corner to a hotel boasting a brace of telephones.

I went down into the areaway to check security; a hefty outside door with two locks, barred windows, no one hiding in the garbage cans. But coming back up I stopped dead in my tracks. A small newsstand—I'd have sworn it hadn't been there when I went down the steps—was standing at the curb under the street light. I was still brooding on my failing eyesight when the kid reappeared, twirling a ring of keys.

"She's asked would I pick up some stuffed pork chops at the delicatessen," he explained, adding that things were tight as a drum with three more locks on the inside door.

But before he could run his errand, marching feet heralded the return of the Grimbros Irregulars. I herded all of us into the van. The first to chime up was Shyster. His old friend Scoop Peters at *The Clarion*—the nickname dated from a high-school job in an ice-cream parlor—had pulled the Lorelei file. It seemed she had reputation as an author in the field of folk remedies and poisons with books including *Salves and Simples My Granny Taught Me* and *Banes of Old Salem*, and *Wild Antidotes I Have Known*. The lecture trail had led her to the National Hypochondriacs Convention where she met and later married Whitney.

Doughboy's and Grundig's calling around to all-night armored-car rental places had drawn a blank. But Ah Choo and Doc—Sandman had quickly

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slumbered off in his phone booth—had hit the jackpot with the pickled newt's eye. A clerk at Toothsome Imports said he'd sold his last jar a week before to a woman who had returned that very morning for a vial of curare and a dozen potted deadly nightshade plants. As the clerk helped her out to a green Rolls with her purchases, he had noticed a woven basket with a lid like the ones snake charmers use and something in a paper bag from The House of Explosives in the back seat.

The newt's eye and curare were accounted for. As I wondered about the deadly nightshade and the explosive I looked out a window and had to rub my ears. The newsstand had disappeared. A fire hydrant marked the place where it had stood. I glanced up the street in time to see the newsstand tottering around a corner.

I leaped for the wheel and sent the van bucking forward, hurling the other sleuths in the rear into a monstrous tangle of arms and legs. I rounded the corner and saw, between the abandoned newsstand and the paddy-green Rolls, a woman with a plunger box from which a silver wire led back the way we had come. Cursing myself, I spun the van into a mighty U-turn, bringing an avalanche of diapers down on the struggling bodies in the rear.

As I took the corner again, an explosion turned Bianca's fire hydrant into a geyser of water. I shouted for calculations—the apartment's dimensions, the volume of water per second from the hydrant, the oxygen consumption of a person treading water. We reached the curb in a cloud of addition and multiplication. Apparently with the air trapped under the ceiling Bianca could last for 27 minutes. That certainly took the heat off.

But then the kid couldn't find the key ring and we stood in the downpour watching him slap his pockets. Then his trembling hand couldn't hit the keyhole and when Grundig snatched at the key ring in exasperation it broke open. With much grunting, groaning, and knocking of heads the eight of us wallowed around ankle-deep in water. By the time we reached the apartment door we were slogging in water knee-high.

But as the kid unlocked the locks a nag surfaced. "Kid," I asked, "what's this sending you out for stuffed *pork chops*? Could it be your client's a secret carnivore?"

"They're for the fish," laughed the kid.

I jammed a foot against the door. "What fish, kid?" I asked.

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"Somebody left a tankful on her doorstep," he said. "The note said they needed a good home under a bed somewhere and now and then a stuffed pork chop. She hopes to wean them off onto soybeans."

His description of the fish left everyone nervously shifting feet. *Asalmus nattereri*, the most dangerous of the piranha.

"Kid," I said, "open the door and we're fish food from the knee-caps down."

Frantic-eyed, the kid worked his jaws this way and that as if trying to swallow a sharp many-cornered object. Suddenly Doughboy appeared from somewhere floating two empty garbage cans behind him. "A trick from the trenches, kid, when the foot rot got too bad," he said, ordering the kid to put a leg in each can. Then he commandeered Sandman's and my suspenders. These he threaded up through the shoulder straps of the kid's trenchcoat and then tied them to the handles of the garbage cans fore and aft. With his galvanized, piranha-proof hip boots he was beginning to see why detectives wore trenchcoats.

"You're not out of the woods yet, kid," I warned. "Pray your client made it to high ground." And with that the rest of us did the same, hustling back up to the sidewalk.

The kid emerged shortly, all red ears and embarrassed, carrying Bianca in his arms. She wore a bath towel and held an overnight bag hastily stuffed with clothes. "I was in the tub when the explosion came," she explained. "But you get used to things like that living in the city." Bianca looked us over with a puzzled frown. "Say, who are these gentlemen, anyway?" she asked the kid.

"They're a singing group called The Jaspers," came his smooth ad lib. "I flagged them down and borrowed their suspenders. I'd like you to meet Pappy, Doughboy, Grundig, Ah Choo, Sandman, Doc, and Shyster. And hey, on their way downtown to the Oldsters Hootenanny, they'll drop us back at the Grimbros Building. Isn't that fantastic?"

The Jaspers crack earned the kid's shin a good shellacking as we piled back into the van. When we were under way I took a shot in the dark. "Say there, Miss Whitney," I said, "while we were helping your young friend suit up, he mentioned in passing that your stepmother has a diet that's good for the rash. We old-timers are all ears when it comes to a cure for the rash."

"Try a bowl of good old parsnips and cherries at the stroke of midnight," said Bianca.

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Parsnips and cherries! The pieces, as we say in the private-eye business, were starting to fall into place. My pocket watch said 11:28. I told Shyster to step on the gas.

Lorelei had fed Whitney the newt's eye to give him a rash so that she could put him on the parsnips-and-cherries diet. Then whenever she wanted to—meaning when she has disposed of Bianca which she probably now thinks she has—she can inherit the entire Whitney fortune by a simple midnight substitution of deadly nightshade whose root and berries bear a notorious resemblance to parsnips and cherries.

We waited restlessly around the corner until the kid hurried back down from settling Bianca in my office where there was a couch for her to sleep on. Then we sped off uptown again. . .

Many years ago, flying back from a job on the West Coast, I remember seeing the Whitney penthouse rising up out of the morning mist, a jewel of a castle, all sunwashed towers and battlements 87 stories above the street. Just then the plane banked and left me wondering if we were about to set down at Childhood International Airport in the Land of the Faeries. That was the time before Whitney turned hypochondriac.

Today, Rocky Mountain Bighorn sheep trained as attack dogs roamed the ledges beneath the castle walls until called by Alpine horn to eat exotic grasses from Whitney's hand. Today, anti-aircraft guns bristled upward among the palmettos of the castle garden. For all intruders were germ carriers and must not pass. Whitney wouldn't even answer the phone after sunset for fear night miasmas would creep into his ear. And yet we would have to warn him.

Just as we pulled up in front of the night lobby a burly uniformed security man was unlocking the glass door to let out a hunchbacked, unshaven crone with a nose wart the size of a potato. "Apples! Won't you buy my apples?" she croaked, wagging a basket of pippins. "Help a good cause, handsome," she added, chucking me coquettishly under the chin. "The fund drive of the Veterans of the Great Depression wants to raise a Wall Street statue to the Unknown Jumper."

"Sorry, Granny," I said, having no time to dally, and passed her by. I blinked my wallet at the security man. "Federal Elevator Administration, Bureau of Inspections," I announced.

That rumpled his brow and those of the two other security bruisers playing cards with the

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elevator operator. But they must have decided they could handle seven old geezers and a wet-behind-the-ears hippie, so we were motioned inside.

When I gave the elevator operator his blink of the wallet he said suspiciously, "Eight guys to inspect one elevator?"

"You'd like us to inspect them empty, wouldn't you?" I answered with a knowing smile. Then I led the boys into the elevator with the operator at our heels. "By damn, it's an old Robinson Rocket," I said, pounding the walls contemptuously. "If you can really get this crate off the ground, let's take a spin up to the penthouse."

The security men made animal noises and moved to step inside. I stopped them with an imperious wave and demanded of the operator, "You do have a solo license, don't you?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Maybe they better ride along."

I stopped their fresh advance by wagging a scolding finger at the sign setting the elevator's maximum load at 1800 pounds. Daunted, the three bruisers screwed up their ears in estimations and additions. "Next car, please," I said, punching the Up button. The elevator shot skyward.

The operator frowned. "Maybe I better see that ID again."

"Check him out, Doc," I said. "Looks like the eyes are starting to go."

Dvorak made the guy squirm with his penlight and then pried his jaw open. "Your own teeth, I see," he clucked with disapproval. "A dangerous state of affairs. Elevator operators should look on each tooth as a land mine inside their heads liable at any moment to explode and disable them in flight as diabetic passengers gasp for insulin and pregnant mothers feel their time has come."

The operator shook his jaw loose. "Hey, this is crazy," he said without conviction.

"Steady as she goes," I said as the floors flicked by on the indicator. "Steady as she goes. Say, your navigation's not half bad. Passing the oral exam will mean another stripe on your sleeve for sure."

Shyster piped up on cue, "If a ten-ton elevator and a twenty-ton elevator plunged down thousand-foot shafts, which would hit the bottom first?"

"Multiple choice," announced Ah Choo, smiling craftily. "If a wise man's elevator became becalmed in its shaft, swinging back and forth high above the street, would he—"

"A," said the kid, "Lead his passengers to safety by shinnying up the cables to the roof? Or—"

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"B," said Grundig, "Remain with his elevator until help arrives even if that means resorting to cannibalism? Or—"

"C," said Sandman, "Remove the control-panel cover and, though running the risk of turning the elevator into a sizzling cage of electric death, try to repair the mechanism."

"Write a brief essay on the following theme," ordered Shyster. "Are today's free elevators setting the stage for tomorrow's nationalization of railroads?"

"While you're framing your answers, let's check you out on instrument flying," I said, when we reached the penthouse. As we filed out I reached back inside and switched off the overhead light. "Take her down to ground zero and bring her back flying by the seat of your pants." The door closed on the operator rubbing his jawbone with fearful fingertips.

We were now standing in the penthouse vestibule while a recorded voice ordered us to strip and pass with our clothes through a side door marked "Decontamination Unit." There we were told we would be dipped in a chemical bath, dusted with disinfectant, and outfitted in sanitary, hospital garb. Hearty assurances that we were about to feel truly clean for the first time in our lives did not convince. Nor did we have the time. Doughboy kicked the front door open with the flat of his foot, triggering a loud alarm and the moan of an electrified Alpine horn.

Down a very long marble hallway charged four oversized orderlies wearing surgical masks and carrying large spray guns at the ready. When they saw how many we were, they slowed, proceeding cautiously, pumping a heavy germicide that curled mustard-yellow along the floor to herd us back to the elevator.

As I slipped my dentures into a vest pocket for safekeeping, the kid buckled the belt on his trenchcoat like a proper private eye and stepped out in front. "I'll take it from here, guys," he announced. "I can fight my own battles."

"Kid," I pleaded, "from out of your storehouse of future donnybrooks make us a gift of this one, which may well be our last."

"The leaves are falling, kid," observed Shyster. "Soon it'll be icy underfoot. Throw a punch and you can end up on your fanny with a broken hip."

"And come spring we might not be here, right, men?" said Grundig.

The kid's eye filled with pity and he stepped aside. "Be my guest," he said.

Well, it didn't begin like

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much of a fight. They counted on the germicide to take out our starch. But after a lifetime of big-city air, cheap tobacco, and cheaper bars, that ugly fog was like a shot of ozone. Our big problem was keeping them on their feet until each of us got in a good punch. Then all hell broke loose.

First, a hundred antique clocks sounded the stroke of midnight throughout the penthouse. Then the elevator door behind us disgorged the security men, now as mad as hornets. Then hoofs clattered on marble and three Bighorns with mean little eyes came barreling down the hall.

Quickly I called to the kid to toss me his pouch, the one he used to make his thick roll-your-owns. That was the closest I could come to exotic grasses. I scattered some leaves so they'd get the scent and then lobbed the pouch into the elevator. The Bighorns lunged right in after it, driving the security men before them. The elevator operator hit the button too late. The door closed behind the sheep. Screams, shouts, and thumps disappeared downward.

The kid sprinted off down the hall in search of Whitney with Ah Choo, who had disposed of his orderly with a punch too fast for the Occidental eye, puffing close to his heels. But the time had come to give the kid back his case. I called, "Ah Choo! Ah Choo!" until he returned to us.

And where was Lorelei? After considerable urging, a battered orderly admitted she'd left minutes before, dressed like someone going to a Witches' Sabbath in an Apple Annie disguise. All right, suppose the crone, she of the Veterans of the Great Depression, had been Lorelei; suppose I had been wrong in thinking she believed Bianca dead; she still didn't know where Bianca was hiding.

But then another orderly volunteered that just before she went out he had watched Lorelei call Dial-a-Joke on the hall phone and then rush into the kitchen, laughing to herself, to prepare Whitney's midnight parsnips and cherries, a task usually left to the help.

A sudden fear drew me to the open directory on the telephone table in the hall. Lorelei didn't know where Binaca was. And where is one place you can turn to find a missing person? I found myself staring down at the yellow-pages listing for private detectives. And Aardvark's name led all the rest! She hadn't called Dial-a-Joke, she'd called me and Bianca had answered.

When at last the elevator returned, its walls bloody and

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butted in, its floor a carpet of human bodies, we left the slamming of doors, running footsteps, and the kid's desperate calling behind and dropped to the lobby, now a shambles of broken glass where the Bighorns had escaped to the street. To this day there are sightings, dubbed fantastical, of Rocky Mountain Bighorns on the ledges high above the city.

The drive back to the Grimbros Building was as wild and reckless as only a race doomed from the start can be. We had to be too late. Old Grimbros, leaning on a push broom and munching solemnly on an apple, looked up as we dashed through the lobby. We found Bianca lying on the floor of my office still clutching an apple wearing a bite-sized grin.

We picked her up and put her on the couch. When the kid burst in we were all standing around looking sad, old, and futile. He had, we later learned, found Whitney in time to knock the lethal parsnips-and-cherries-like concoction from the multimillionaire's startled hand. It seemed the old hypochondriac had postponed his midnight snack and slipped into a surgical mask when he mistook my calling Ah Choo back as a breach of his cordon sanitaire by germs of the common cold.

The kid dropped to one knee at Bianca's side, buried an ear in her breast, and felt her wrist. Apparently there was still a flicker of pulse. "This looks like a case for mouth-to-mouth resuscitation," he announced, his voice grim, his ears glowing red again.

We were old-fashioned enough to withdraw. On my way I took the phone and out in the hall I called my old friend, Chief of Police Brown. The police switchboard laughed. Brown was long dead and buried. But the switchboard would try to connect me with a Captain of Homicide. Waiting, I heard voices behind the office door. Apparently the kid's treatment had worked, or at least was starting to work because they went back at it.

Then the Captain of Homicide was on the line, using a voice he must have stolen from a fifteen-year-old. Feeling very ancient and with Shyster, Doughboy, Ah Choo, Grundig, Doc, and Sandman nodding their bald heads or hoary locks in confirmation, I recounted the events of the day, telling of Lorelei, the armored car, the king cobra, the poisoned rose, the piranha, and the root and berries of the deadly nightshade. When I was done the Captain of Homicide said, "Wow!"

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THE JURY BOX

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

As the magazine itself should offer stories of various kinds, so its critic must seek variety with the items he recommends to those who would find further sensationalism in books.

In general the task can be managed, even when I must resurrect some classic of yesteryear. And this month—lo, bonanza!—there need be no apology. Beginning with fourteen guaranteed tales from one collection, we roar on through a brace of superior thrillers, and end with a good detective novel in paperback reprint. Every title can qualify as new; the solitary reprint first appeared only one season ago.

Though I have hesitated to discuss the latest anthology from our editor-in-chief, lest it should suggest cheer-leading rather than appraisal, *Ellery Queen's Aces of Mystery*, compiled by you know whom (Dial Press, $8.95), must win the applause of the sourest sage.

For this collection the editor has chosen stories old and new, long and short. To me it's a joy because it contains more honest mystery detection and less dubious "psychology," most authors concentrating on *who* or *how* rather than not-very-appealing *why*.

Earl Derr Biggers, creator of Charlie Chan, steps from the past with an engaging light-comedy mystery he wrote before introducing his Chinese sleuth. Ed McBain, that sound modern craftsman whom critics underrate, provides a gripping quadruple headache for the 87th Precinct. Among others, including that of the editor himself, I can commend fine performances by Edward D. Hoch, Helen McCloy, Jon L. Breen, and the late Lawrence G. Blochman.

In all cop-and-robber chronicles on a grand scale, you will find no more daring venture or explosive action than in Kenneth Royce's *The Woodcutter Operation* (Simon and Schuster, $7.95).

Five desperate men, heavily armed, have captured London's great Queen Mary Hospital and sealed off its private wing, where they hold the inmates to ransom. In the contest these five have become four. The private wing, its patients already including

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British tycoon Lord Driver, unexpectedly shelters the American Secretary of State. Our bandits have first asked for a million pounds. Now they demand four million, or they will slaughter everyone inside.

Through tense hours of parley, when every police approach ends in blood or stalemate, with both bandits and victims we watch British-American authority compelled to make terms. How these predators are defeated, partly because Lord Driver's family must keep the old man alive for tax reasons, puts blazing finish to as powerful a thriller as we shall read this year.

On its first page *Night of the Juggler*, by William P. McGivern (Putnam, $7.95), grips attention and with frightening credibility whirls you from one threat or crisis to another even worse.

This particular juggler must not be confused with some romantic *jongleur*; he's a murderous psychopath who preys on underage girls. Each victim has been raped and mutilated before the throat-cutting which distorted a meaning from "jugular." Though Mr. Nightmare still eludes the New York police, Lieutenant Tonnelli is feverish to nail him.

Dangerous trails stretch around and inside Central Park. We follow Gus Soltik, the hulking psychopath, as he prowls to choose a sacrifice. We follow Luther Boyd, tough and wealthy ex-Army colonel, whose eleven-year-old daughter is menaced. We follow Kate, his daughter; we follow her mother, Colonel Boyd's estranged wife; we even follow that sympathic doorman at the apartment-house facing the park. Then murderer, cops, and alarmed father all close in. You must not miss the result.

Despite such fast pace and action as galvanize our best slam-bang thrillers, Brain Garfield's *The Threepersons Hunt* (Fawcett, $1.25) also proves to be a carefully plotted detective novel with every clue in sight.

Sam Watchman, Navajo Indian as well as Arizona State Trooper promoted to temporary detective, must bring in moody and dangerous Joe Threepersons, Apache Indian who has broken jail while serving time for murder. But, though Navajo has never loved Apache, did Joe Threepersons really commit the murder of which he was accused?

Temporary status or no, Sam is a first-class detective. Amid colorful characters and vivid southwestern scenes, our Indian Sherlock studies facts even while pursuing his quarry, and strips the mask from guilt in a climax as exciting as it is logical.

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a *NEW* short story by

RUTH RENDELL

The story of a marriage on the rocks, with Ruth Rendell the acute observer of all the telling details, the acute listener to all the mean, petty, accusing, recriminating thrusts and counter-thrusts in the duel of the sexes . . .

THE FALL OF A COIN

by RUTH RENDELL

The manager of the hotel took them up two flights of stairs to their room. There was no elevator. There was no central heating either and, though April, it was very cold.

"A bit small, isn't it?" said Nina Armadale.

"It's a double room and I'm afraid it's all we have left."

"I suppose I'll have to be thankful it hasn't got a double bed," said Nina.

Her husband winced at that, which pleased her. She went over to the window and looked down into a narrow alley bounded by brick walls. The cathedral clock struck five. Nina imagined what that would be like chiming every hour throughout the night, and maybe every quarter as well, and was glad she had brought her sleeping pills.

The manager was still making excuses for the lack of accommodations. "You see, there's this big wedding in the cathedral tomorrow. Sir William Tarrant's daughter. There'll be five hundred guests and most of them are putting up in the town."

"We're going to it," said James Armadale. "That's why we're here."

"Then you'll appreciate the problem. Now the bathroom's just down the passage—turn right and it's the third door on the left. Dinner at seven thirty and breakfast from eight till nine. Oh, and I'd better show Mrs. Armadale how to work the gas fire."

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"Don't bother," said Nina, enraged. "I can work a gas fire." She was struggling with the wardrobe door which at first wouldn't open, and when opened refused to close.

The manager watched her, apparently decided it was hopeless to assist, and said to James, "I really meant about working the gas *meter*. There's a coin-in-the-slot meter—it takes fivepence pieces—and we really find it the best way for guests to manage."

James squatted on the floor beside her and studied the gray metal box. It was an old-fashioned gas meter with brass fittings of the kind he hadn't seen since he had been a student living in a furnished room. A gauge with a red-arrow marker indicated the amount of gas paid for, and at present it showed empty. So if you turned the dial on the gas fire to ON, no gas would come from the meter unless you had previously fed it with one or more fivepence pieces.

But what was the purpose of that brass handle? There were differences between this contraption and the one he'd had in his college days. Maybe, while his had been for the old toxic coal gas, this had been converted for the supply of natural gas. He looked at the manager and asked her.

"No, we're still waiting for natural gas in this part of the country and when it comes the old meters will have to go."

"Then what's the handle for?"

"You turn it to the left like this, insert your coin in the slot, and then turn it to the right. Have you got fivepence on you?"

James hadn't. Nina had stopped listening, he was glad to see. Perhaps when the inevitable quarrel started, as it would as soon as the manager had gone, it would turn on the awfulness of going to this wedding for which he could hardly be blamed, instead of the squalid arrangements in the hotel for which he could.

"Never mind," the manager was saying. "You can't go wrong, it's very simple. When you've put your fivepence in, you just turn the handle to the right as far as it will go and you hear the coin fall. Then you can switch on the fire and light the gas. Is that clear?"

James said it was quite clear, thanks very much, and immediately the manager had left the room, Nina, who wasted no time, said, "Can you tell me one good reason why we couldn't have come here tomorrow?"

"I could tell you several," said James, getting up from the floor, turning his back on that

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antediluvian gadget and the gas fire which looked as if it hadn't given out a therm of heat for about thirty years. "The principal one is that I didn't fancy driving a hundred and fifty miles in a morning coat and tophat."

"Didn't fancy driving with your usual Saturday morning hangover, you mean."

"Let's not start a row, Nina. Let's have a bit of peace for just one evening. Sir William is my company chairman. I have to take it as an honor that we were asked to this wedding, and if we have an uncomfortable evening and night because of it, that can't be helped. It's part of my job."

"Just how pompous can you get?" said Nina with what in a less attractive woman would have been called a snarl. "I wonder what Sir William-Bloody-Tarrant would say if he could see his sales director after he's got a bottle of whiskey inside him."

"He doesn't see me," said James, lighting a cigarette, and adding because she hadn't yet broken his spirit, "That's your privilege."

"*Privilege*!" Nina, who had been furiously unpacking her case and throwing clothes onto one of the beds, now stopped doing this because it sapped some of the energy she needed for quarreling. She sat down on the bed and snapped, "Give me a cigarette. You've no manners, have you? Do you know how uncouth you are? This place'll suit you fine, it's just up to your mark—gas meters and a loo about five hundred yards away. That won't bother you as long as there's a bar. I'll be able to have the *privilege* of sharing my bedroom with a disgusting soak."

She drew breath like a swimmer and plunged on. "Do you realize we haven't slept in the same room for two years? Didn't think of that, did you, when you left booking until the last minute? Or maybe—yes, that was it, my God!—maybe you did think of it. Oh, I know you so well, James Armadale. You thought being in here with me, undressing with me, would work a miracle. I'd come round. I'd—what's the expression? —*resume marital relations*. You got them to give us this—this cell—on purpose. You bloody well fixed it!"

"No," said James. He said it quietly and rather feebly because he had experienced such a strong inner recoil that he could hardly speak at all.

"You liar! D'you think I've forgotten the fuss you made when I got you to sleep in the spare room? D'you think I've forgotten about that woman,

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that Frances? I'll never forget and I'll never forgive you. So don't think I'm going to let bygones by bygones when you try pawing me about after the bar closes."

"I won't do that," said James, reflecting that in a quarter of an hour the bar would be opening. "I shall never again try what you so charmingly describe as pawing you about."

"No, because you know you wouldn't get anywhere. You know you'd get a slap on the face you wouldn't forget in a hurry."

"Nina," he said, "let's stop this. It's hypothetical, it won't happen. If we are going to go on living together—and I suppose we are, though God knows why—can't we try to live in peace?"

She flushed and said in a thick sullen voice, "You should have thought of that before you were unfaithful to me with that woman."

"That," he said, "was three years ago—*three years*. I don't want to provoke you and we've been into this enough times, but you know very well why. I was unfaithful to you. I'm only thirty-five, I'm still young. I couldn't stand being permitted *marital relations*—pawing you about, if you like that better—about six times a year. Do I have to go over it all again?"

"Not on my account. It won't make any difference to me what excuses you make." The smoke in the tiny room made her cough and, opening the window, she inhaled the damp cold air. "You asked me," she said, turning round, "why we have to go on living together. I'll tell you why. Because you married me. I've got a right to you and I'll never divorce you. You've got me till death do us part. Till death, James. Right?"

He didn't answer. An icy blast had come into the room when she had opened the window, and he felt in his pocket. "If you're going to stay in here till dinner," he said, "you'll want the gas fire on. Have you got any fivepence pieces? I haven't, unless I can get some change."

"Oh, you'll get some all right. In the bar. And just for your information, I haven't brought any money with me. That's *your* privilege."

When he had left her alone, she sat in the cold room for some minutes, staring at the brick wall. Till death do us part, she had told him, and she meant it. She would never leave him and he must never be allowed to leave her, but she hoped he would die.

It wasn't her fault she was frigid. She had always supposed he understood. She had sup-

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posed her good looks and her capacity as housewife and hostess compensated for a revulsion she couldn't help. And it wasn't just against him, but against all men, any man. He had seemed to accept it.

In her sexless way she had loved him. And then, when he had seemed happier and more at ease than at any time in their marriage, when he had ceased to make those painful demands and had become so sweet to her, so generous with gifts, he had suddenly and without shame confessed it.

She wouldn't mind, he had told her; he knew that. She wouldn't resent his finding elsewhere what she so evidently disliked giving him. While he provided for her and spent nearly all his leisure with her and respected her as his wife, she should be relieved, disliking sex as she did, that he had found someone else.

He had said it was the pent-up energy caused by her repressions that made her fly at him, beat at him with her hands, scream at him words he didn't know she knew. To her dying day she would remember his astonishment. He had genuinely thought she wouldn't mind. And it had taken weeks of nagging and screaming and threats to make him agree to give Frances up.

She had driven him out of her bedroom and settled into the bitter unremitting vendetta she would keep up till death parted them. Even now, he didn't understand how agonizingly he had hurt her. But there were no more women and he had begun to drink.

He was drinking now, she thought, and by nine o'clock he would be stretched out, dead-drunk on that bed separated by only a few inches from her own.

The room was too cold to sit in any longer. She tried the gas fire, turning the switch to ON; but the match she held to it refused to ignite it, and presently she made her way downstairs and into the little lounge where there was a coal fire and people were watching television.

They met again at dinner.

James Armadale had drunk half a pint of whiskey, and now, to go with the brown Windsor soup and hotted-up roast lamb, he ordered a bottle of burgundy.

"Just as a matter of idle curiosity," said Nina, "why do you drink so much?"

"To drown my sorrows," said James. "The classic reason. Happens to be true in my case. Would you like some wine?"

"I'd better have a glass, hadn't I, otherwise you'll drink the whole bottle."

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The dining room was full and most of the other diners were middle-aged or elderly. Many of them, James supposed, would be wedding guests like themselves. He could see that their own arrival had been noted and that at the surrounding tables their appearance was being favorably commented upon. It afforded him a thin wry amusement to think that they would be judged a handsome, well-suited, and happy couple.

"Nina," he said, "we can't go on like this. It's not fair on either of us. We're destroying ourselves and each other. We have to talk about what we're going to do."

"Pick your moments, don't you? I'm not going to talk about it in a public place."

She had spoken in a low subdued voice, quite different from her hectoring tone in their bedroom, and she shot quick nervous glances at the neighboring tables.

"It's because this is a public place that I think we stand a better chance of talking about it reasonably. When we're alone you get hysterical and then neither of us can be rational. If we talk about it now, I think I know you well enough to say you won't scream at me."

"I could walk out though, couldn't I? Besides, you're drunk."

"I am not drunk. Frankly, I probably shall be in an hour's time and that's another reason why we ought to talk here and now. Look, Nina, you don't love me—you've said so often enough—and whatever crazy ideas you have about my having designs on you, I don't love you either. We've been into the reasons for that so many times that I don't need to go into them now, but can't we come to some sort of amicable arrangement to split up?"

"So that you can have all the women you want? So that you can bring that bitch Frances into my house?"

"No," he said, "you can have the house. The court would probably award you one-third of my income, but I'll give you more if you want. I'd give you half." He had nearly added, "to be rid of you," but he bit off the words as being too provocative. His speech was already thickening and slurring.

It was disconcerting—though this was what he had expected—to hear how inhibition made her voice soft and kept her face controlled. The words she used were the same, though. He had heard them a thousand times before. "If you leave me, I'll follow you. I'll go to your office and tell them all about it. I'll sit on your doorstep. I won't be abandoned. I'd

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rather die. I won't be a divorced woman just because you've got tired of me."

"If you go on like this," he said thickly, "you'll find yourself a widow. Will you like that?"

Had they been alone, she would have screamed the affirmative at him. Because they weren't, she gave him a thin, sharp, and concentrated smile, a smile which an observer might have taken for amusement at some married couple's private joke.

"Yes," she said, "I'd like to be a widow, *your* widow. Drink yourself to death, why don't you? That's what you have to do if you want to be rid of me."

The waitress came to their table. James ordered a double brandy and "coffee for my wife." He knew he would never be rid of her. He wasn't the sort of man who can stand public disruption of his life, scenes at work, the involvement of friends and employers. It must be, he knew, an amicable split or none at all.

And since she would never see reason, never understand or forgive or forget, he must soldier on. With the help of this, he thought, as the brandy spread its dim cloudy euphoria through his brain.

He drained his glass quickly, muttered an "excuse me" to her for the benefit of listeners, and left the dining room.

Nina returned to the television lounge. There was a play on and its theme was a marital situation that almost paralleled her own. The old ladies with their knitting and the old men with their after-dinner cigars watched it apathetically.

She thought she might take the car and go somewhere for a drive. It didn't much matter where—anywhere would do that was far enough from this hotel and James and that cathedral clock whose chimes split the hours into fifteen-minute segments with long brazen peals. There must be someplace in this town where one could get a decent cup of coffee, some cinema maybe where they weren't showing a film about marriage or what people, she thought shudderingly, called sexual relationships.

She went upstairs to get the car keys and some money.

James was fast asleep. He had taken off his tie and his shoes, but otherwise he was fully dressed, lying on his back and snoring. Stupid of him not to get under the covers. He'd freeze. Maybe he'd die of exposure. Well, she wasn't going to cover him up, but she'd close the window so it wouldn't be too cold when she came in.

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The car keys were in his jacket pocket, mixed up with a lot of loose change. The feel of his warm body through the material made her shiver. His breath smelled of spirits and he was sweating in spite of the cold. Among the change were two fivepence pieces. She'd take one of those and keep it till the morning to feed that gas meter.

It would be horrible dressing for that wedding in here at zero temperature. Why not feed it now so that the room would be ready for the morning, ready to turn the gas fire on and give her some heat when she came in at midnight, come to that?

The room was faintly illuminated by the yellow light from the street lamp in the alley. She crouched down in front of the gas fire and noticed she hadn't turned the dial to OFF after her match had failed to ignite the jets. It wouldn't do to feed that meter now with the dial turned to ON, and have fivepence worth of old-fashioned toxic gas flood the room. Not with the window tight shut and not a crack round that heavy old door. Slowly she put her hand out to turn the dial to OFF.

Her fingers touched it. Her hand remained still, poised. She heard her heart begin to thud softly in the silence as the idea in all its brilliant awfulness took hold of her. Wouldn't do? Was she mad? It wouldn't do to feed that meter now with the gas fire dial turned to ON? What would do as well, as efficiently, as finally? She withdrew her hand and clasped it in the other to steady it.

Rising to her feet, she contemplated her sleeping husband. The sweat was standing on his pale forehead. He snored as rhythmically, as stertorously, as her own heart was beating. A widow, she thought, alone and free in her own unshared house. Not divorced, despised, disowned, laughed at by judges and solicitors for her crippling frigidity, not mocked by that Frances and her successors, but a widow whom all the world would pity and respect.

Comfortably off too, if not rich, with an income from James's life assurance and very likely a pension from Sir William Tarrant.

James wouldn't wake up till midnight. No, that was wrong. He wouldn't *have* wakened up till midnight. What she meant was he wouldn't wake up at all.

The dial on the gas fire was still on. She took the fivepence coin and tiptoed over to the meter. Nothing would wake him, but still she tiptoed. The window was tight shut with nothing beyond it but that alley, that glistening lamp, and the

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towering wall of the cathedral.

She studied the meter, kneeling down. It was the first time in her sheltered, cosseted, snug life that she had ever actually seen a coin-in-the-slot gas meter. But if morons like hotel servants and the sort of people who would stay in a place like this could work it, she could.

There was the slot where the coin went in, there the gauge whose red arrow showed empty. All you had to do, presumably, was slip in the coin, fiddle about with that handle, and then, if the gas fire dial was left on, toxic coal gas—the kind of gas that had killed thousands in the past, careless old people, suicides, accident-prone fools—would rapidly begin to seep out of the unlighted jets.

James wouldn't smell it. Drink had paralyzed him into an unconsciousness as deep as that which her own sleeping tablets brought to her.

Nina was certain it wouldn't matter that she hadn't paid close attention to the manager's instructions. What had she said? Turn the handle to the left, insert the coin, then turn it to the right.

She hesitated for a moment, just long enough for brief fractured memories to cross her mind—James when they were first married, James patient and self-denying on their honeymoon, James promising that her coldness wouldn't matter, that with time and love . . . James confessing with a defiant smirk, throwing Frances' name at her, James going on a three-day bender because she couldn't pretend the wound he'd given her was just a surface hurt, James drunk night after night . . .

She didn't hesitate any longer.

She got her coat, put the car keys in her handbag. Then she knelt again, between the gas fire and the meter. First she checked that the dial, which was small and almost at ground level, was set at ON. She took hold of the brass handle on the meter and turned it to the left. The coin slot was now fully exposed and open. She pressed in the fivepence piece and flicked the handle to the right. There was no need to wait for the warning smell, oniony, acrid, of the escaping gas. Without looking back, she walked swiftly from the room, closing the door behind her.

The cathedral clock chimed the last quarter before nine.

When the bar closed at eleven thirty, a crowd of people coming upstairs and chattering in loud voices would have awakened even the deepest

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sleeper. They woke James. He didn't move for some time but lay there with his eyes open till he heard the clock chime midnight. When the last stroke died away he reached out and turned on the bedside lamp.

The light was like a knife going into his head, and he groaned. But he felt like this most nights at midnight and there was no use making a fuss. Who would hear or care if he did? Nina was evidently still downstairs in that lounge. It was too much to hope she might stay there all night out of fear of being alone with him.

No, she'd be up now that television was over, and she'd start berating him for his drunkenness and his infidelity—not that there had been any since Frances—and they would lie there bickering and smarting until gray light mingled with that yellow light, and the cathedral clock told them it was dawn.

And yet she had been so sweet once, so pathetic and desperate in her sad failure. It had never occurred to him to blame her, though his body had suffered. And his own solution, honestly confessed, might have worked so well for all three of them if she had only been rational.

He wondered vaguely, for the thousandth time, why he had been such a fool to confess when, with a little deception, he might be happier now than at any time in his marriage. But he was in no fit state to think. Where had that woman said the bathroom was? Turn right down the passage and the third door on the left. He lay there till the clock struck the quarter before he felt he couldn't wait any longer and he'd have to find it.

The cold air in the passage—Lord, it was more like January than April—steadied him a little but made his head bang and throb. He must be crazy to go on like this. What the hell was he doing, turning himself into an alcoholic at thirty-five? Because there were no two ways about it, he was an alcoholic all right, a drunk. And if he stayed with Nina he'd be a dead alcoholic by forty.

But how can you leave a woman who won't leave you? Give up his job, run away, go to the ends of the earth . . . It wasn't unusual for him to have wild thoughts like this at midnight, but when the morning came he knew he would just soldier on.

He stayed in the bathroom for about ten minutes. Coming back along the passage, he heard footsteps on the stairs, and knowing he must look horrible and smell horribly of li-

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quor, he retreated behind the open door of what proved to be a broom closet. But it was only his wife.

She approached their room door slowly as if she were bracing herself to face something—himself, probably, he thought. Had she really that much loathing of him that she had to draw in her breath and clench her hands before confronting him? She was very pale. She looked ill and frightened, and when she had opened the door and gone inside he heard her give a kind of shrill gasp that was almost a shriek.

He followed her into the room, and when she turned and saw him he thought she was going to faint. She had been pale before, but now she turned paper-white. Once, when he had still loved her and had hoped he might teach her to love him, he would have been concerned. But now he didn't care, and all he said was, "Been watching something nasty on the TV?"

She didn't answer him. She sat down on her bed and put her head into her hands. James undressed and got into bed. Presently Nina got up and began taking her clothes off slowly and mechanically. His head and body had begun to twitch as they did when he was recovering from the effects of a drinking bout. It left him wide-awake. He wouldn't sleep again for hours.

He watched her curiously but dispassionately, for he had long ago ceased to derive the slightest pleasure or excitement from seeing her undress. What intrigued him now was that, though she was evidently in some sort of shock, her hands shaking, she still couldn't discard those modest subterfuges of hers, her way of turning her back when she stepped out of her dress, of pulling her nightgown over her head before she took off her underclothes.

She put on her dressing gown and went to the bathroom. When she came back her face was greasy where she had cleaned off the makeup and she was shivering.

"You'd better take a sleeping tablet," he said.

"I've already taken one in the bathroom. I wanted a bath but there wasn't any hot water." Getting into bed, she exclaimed in her normal fierce way, "Nothing works in this damned place! Nothing goes right!"

"Put out the light and go to sleep. Anyone would think you have to spend the rest of your life here instead of just one night."

She made no reply. They never said good night to each

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other. When she had put out her light, the room wasn't really dark because a street lamp was still lit in the alley outside. He had seldom felt less like sleep, and now he was aware of a sensation he hadn't expected because he hadn't thought about it. He didn't want to share a bedroom with her.

That cold modesty, which had once been enticing, now repelled him. He raised himself on one elbow and peered at her. She lay in the defensive attitude of a woman who fears assault, flat on her stomach, her arms folded under her head. Although the sleeping pill had begun to take effect, her body seemed stiff, prepared to galvanize into violence at a touch.

She smelled cold. A sour saltiness emanated from her as if there were sea water in her veins instead of blood. He thought of real women with warm blood, women who awoke from sleep when their husband's faces were near theirs, who never recoiled but smiled and put out their arms. She would keep him from them forever until drink or time made him as frozen as she was.

Suddenly he knew he couldn't stay in that room. He might do something dreadful—beat her up perhaps or even kill her. And much as he wanted to be rid of her, spend no more time with her, no more money on her, the notion of killing her was as absurd as it was grotesque. It was unthinkable. But he couldn't stay here.

He got up and put on his dressing gown. He'd go to that lounge where she'd watched television, take a blanket and spend the rest of the night there. She wouldn't wake till eight or nine and by then he'd be back, ready to dress for the wedding.

Funny, really, their going to a wedding, to watch someone else getting into the same boat. But it wouldn't be the same boat, for if the office gossip was more than that, Sir William's daughter had already opened her warm arms to many men.

The cathedral clock struck one. By morning the room would be icy and they'd need that gas fire. Why not put a fivepence piece in the meter now so that the fire would work as soon as he wanted it?

The fire itself lay in shadow, but the meter was clearly illuminated by the street lamp. James knelt, trying to remember the instructions of the manager. Better try it out first before he put his coin in, his only fivepence coin. Strange, that. He could have sworn he'd had two when he first went to bed.

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What had the manager said? Turn the handle to the left, insert the coin, then turn the handle to the right. No, turn it to the right as far as it will go until *you hear the coin fall.* Keeping hold of his coin—he didn't want to waste it if what Nina said was true and nothing worked in this place—he turned the handle to the left, then to the right as far as it would go.

Inside the meter a coin fell with a small dull clang. The red-arrow marker on the gauge, which had stood at empty, moved along to register payment. Good. He was glad he hadn't wasted his money. The previous guest must have put a coin in and failed to turn the handle until the coin fell. So Nina had been wrong about things not working. Still, it wasn't unusual for her to get the wrong idea, not unusual at all.

Gas would come through as soon the dial was switched to ON. James checked that the window was shut to keep out as much of the cold as possible, gave a last look at the sleeping, heavily sedated woman, and went out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"Q"

NEXT MONTH...

11 *NEW* stories — including

MICHAEL GILBERT
ROBERT L. FISH
EDWARD D. HOCH
BARRY PEROWNE

and a "whereunit" novelet by

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a *NEW* Nick Velvet story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Can a person vanish from the back seat of a car that's traveling sixty miles an hour on an expressway?" From a closed car? Vanish into thin air leaving the seat belt still fastened? Edward D. Hoch's "impossible crimes" become more and more startling! This one confronts Nick Velvet, the unique thief who never steals anything of value—not cash or negotiable bonds or jewels or objets d'art—only the worthless, and for a minimum fee of $20,000. And this time Nick goes after a penny—not entirely worthless, but still intrinsically only one cent. But before Nick can steal the penny he has to solve the unsolvable, detect the undetectable . . .

THE THEFT OF THE BERMUDA PENNY

by EDWARD D. HOCH

"Nicky?"

Nick Velvet had been far away in some private dream world when Gloria's voice summoned him back. He put down his beer and asked, "What is it?"

"Nicky, how can a person vanish from the back seat of a car that's traveling sixty miles an hour on an expressway?"

"He can't," Nick answered, picking up the beer again.

"But it's right here in the paper, Nicky! People along the New York State Thruway report picking up a young long-haired hitchhiker dressed all in white. He gets into the back seat, fastens his seat belt, and talks to the people about God. Then, suddenly they look around and he's gone! And the seat belt is still fastened!"

Nick grunted, only half hearing her. "If I was a detective I could solve it."

"Don't you get any cases like that in your government work, Nicky?"

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"Not often." Gloria's mistaken impression of his government service helped cover his awkward absences, so he did nothing to correct it.

"What about—?" she began, but the telephone interrupted her.

It was for Nick, and he took it in the little den out of Gloria's hearing. The voice was that of a man for whom he'd worked on two prior occasions. "Velvet? I have someone with an urgent assignment. Can you handle it?"

"If it's in my line."

"It is. The client is a young woman. Her father was a dear friend of mine. Could you meet her at the marina, where you keep your boat?"

It was a good place for a meeting. On a summer's weekend one or two more people would attract no attention. "How soon?"

"One hour?"

"Make it two," Nick said.

As he'd expected, the Saturday sailors were lounging on the grass in their trunks and bikinis, sipping beer or gin-and-tonics. No one noticed him as he worked around his cabin cruiser. He'd been there less than half an hour when a young woman in white slacks and a blue shirt approached him. "Nice boat," she said.

"I like it."

"You're Nick Velvet?" She could have been past thirty, but her face and mane of blonde hair made her look younger.

"That's right."

"I'm Jeanne Kraft, I want to hire you."

He glanced around to make certain no one could hear. "You know I never steal money or anything of value."

She hesitated. "This *is* money, but—"

"Then I can't do it."

"—it's only a penny. A Bermuda penny, to be exact."

She took one from the pocket of her slacks and handed it to him. The penny had the identical size and copper color of an American cent, with a likeness of Queen Elizabeth on the obverse together with the words BERMUDA and ELIZABETH II. The reverse had some sort of pig with a curly tail, and the words ONE CENT with the date 1971. A deep gouge ran across the pig's back, as if the coin had been scratched with a knife.

"What's the pig for?" Nick asked.

"Early Bermuda coins—the first coins struck in North America—were called hog money because of the wild hog shown on them. I think it's been a tradition on Bermuda coins ever since."

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"Is this some sort of rare coin that's worth a fortune?"

"Not at all. It's worth one cent in Bermuda and the same here, where it can be passed as an American penny."

"And you want me to steal one just like this?"

"That's right. The same date and the same sort of scratch on it."

"Who from?"

"A man named Alfred Cazar. He's in New York now, at the Waldorf. But he'll be leaving in a couple of days to drive upstate."

"Where upstate?"

"Saratoga Springs, for the August racing season." She reached out her hand and took back the penny. "A man named Blaze will be with him. He's a sort of hired traveling companion."

"You know my minimum fee is twenty thousand dollars?"

"Yes. I have a down payment here." She passed him an envelope. "You'll get the rest when you deliver the duplicate of this penny."

"Where can I contact you?"

"I'll be in Saratoga too, at the Grand Union Motel."

Nick smiled. "Then I'll see you there, Miss Kraft."

Making contact with Alfred Cazar proved to be the easiest part of it. Nick simply phoned his suite at the Waldorf and asked for an appointment, representing himself as a magazine writer doing an article on the Saratoga racing season. Because he might have to show his driver's license later, he used his real name.

When he reached the room, a spry little man in his sixties met him at the door. "I'm Cazar. You must be Velvet."

"That's right." Nick followed him inside, passing the remains of a room-service breakfast for two. He wondered if there was a girl in the next room, but then he remembered the male companion Jeanne had mentioned.

"Don't know how you happened to pick me," Cazar said as he finished knotting his necktie. "But it's true—I've been goin' up to Saratoga every August for the past twenty-four years. Used to be a lot different in the old days, of course. You'd get these big-money men and really high rollers from all over the country—bigwigs, Vegas stickmen, nomad hustlers—all comin' to Saratoga for August."

"But not any more?" Nick said.

"Not any more. The town's pretty much had it. Hell, in New York State you got off-track bettin' now. Who wants to go all the way to Saratoga for the action?"

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Nick made a few notes. "Then why do you still go, Mr. Cazar?"

The little man grinned. "The springs are good for my arthritis. I bathe in them every mornin', then go to the track in the afternoon. At my age it helps the body and the wallet both."

From the beginning Nick's only problem in stealing the Bermuda penny was in locating it. He doubted if the little man carried it on him—not if it had value to someone—and searching this suite of rooms for an object that small could be a near-impossible task. He had to get the man away from here, where the possessions to be searched would be limited to the clothes on his back and a suitcase. "I'd like to go with you to Saratoga," he suggested now.

"Go with me? I'll be driving up, in a rented car."

"I could do part of the driving for you," Nick offered. "To properly research my article I really should spend as much time with you as possible."

"I have someone to do the driving," Alfred Cazar said. He raised his voice and called, "Hugo, come in here for a moment!"

A bulky man who looked like an ex-prizefighter appeared in the doorway. Apparently he'd been listening from the next room and Nick didn't doubt for a moment that he carried a gun under the jacket of his summer suit. "You want me, boss?"

"Hugo Blaze—Nick Velvet, a magazine writer. He's doing a story on the season at Saratoga. Wants to drive up there with us."

The newcomer shook Nick's hand with a powerful grip. "Pleased to meet you."

Close up, Nick was forced to revise his first impression. Hugo Blaze's rough features were partly the result of pockmarks that made him look more sinister than he normally would. But his eyes were friendly, and Nick decided maybe he wasn't carrying a gun under his jacket after all.

"Are you a gambling man?" Cazar asked Nick.

"At times," Nick admitted. "But not so it interferes with my work."

"The drive to Saratoga Springs, along the Thruway and the Northway, can be a boring one. You can come along if you'll join me in a little wagering along the way."

"Fair enough," Nick agreed.

Cazar motioned to Blaze. "Hugo, bring along some of those sugar cubes from the breakfast table. We may want to picnic along the way."

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The drive up to Albany, in the air-conditioned comfort of the closed car, was quickly enlivened by Cazar's betting games. "Now, Velvet," he said from the back seat, "call out any two-digit number."

"Sixty-three," Nick responded.

"Sixty-three. Fine! I'll bet you twenty dollars even money that none of the first fifty cars to pass us will have a sixty-three as the last two digits of its license plate."

It was difficult to see the plates on cars across the dividing mall, but they were going slowly enough so that fifty cars had passed them in the left lane during the first half hour. Cazar won his bet, and Nick passed a twenty-dollar bill to him in the back seat.

Hugo Blaze, sitting behind the wheel, smirked and said, "Never bet against the boss."

Cazar patted Nick on the shoulder. "Come on, let's stop at the next service area for lunch and I'll give you a chance to win it back."

The service area, about halfway to Albany, was nearly empty when they drove in. Blaze brought out a plastic cloth and spread it over one of the wooden picnic tables while Nick and Alfred Cazar went in to buy coffee and sandwiches. "You can drive the rest of the way to Albany if you want," Cazar suggested. "Then Hugo will take over from Albany to Saratoga."

"Fine."

The little man eyed him speculatively. "You know, Velvet, you don't seem like a writer. A guy I know told me once about a thief named Velvet. You wouldn't be him, would you?"

Nick merely grinned. "You seem to be doing the stealing, the way you got that twenty off me."

"I'll give you a chance to win it back." They'd reached the picnic table by the side of the parking lot where Hugo Blaze waited. "Hugo, have you got those sugar cubes?"

Blaze dug into his pocket and took out a handful of wrapped sugar cubes from the hotel. He unwrapped two of them and placed them on the tablecloth. "What's that for?" Nick asked.

Alfred Cazar smiled. "Picnics always attract flies. You choose one sugar cube and I'll take the other. I'll bet twenty, even money, that a fly lands on my cube first."

"You'll bet on anything, won't you?" Nick said, but he took a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet.

"Which cube?"

"The one on the right."

Cazar nodded. "Then I'll

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move mine over here and we'll see what happens."

While they ate their sandwiches they kept an eye on the twin cubes of sugar, resting about a foot apart. Presently a fly appeared, attracted by the food, and swooped low over the table. But it flew off without landing on the sugar. A second fly came by, hesitated a moment, and then settled on top of Cazar's cube.

"You win," Nick said, handing him the money.

"Let's try it again. I'll give you the other cube this time, just to prove it's honest. Another twenty?"

Nick showed his depleted wallet. "I can't afford it."

"Hell, I thought you were a gamblin' man!"

"How about if we play for the change in our pockets?" Nick suggested. He emptied out his own pocket, placing a quarter, four dimes, a nickel, and eight pennies on the table.

"Seventy-eight cents? You want me to gamble for seventy-eight cents?"

"Sure. Give me a break—you've won forty bucks from me already!"

Cazar produced a little zippered purse which he emptied on the table. "Seventy-one cents. It's the best I can do. Hugo, you got seven cents?"

The bulky Blaze flipped a dime onto the pile. But Alfred Cazar had another thought. He reached into a pocket of his wallet and extracted another penny. "My lucky coin—I'll bet that, too."

Nick could hardly believe it would be this easy. There, before his eyes, was the Bermuda penny he'd been hired to steal. Even the scratch was the same as on Jeanne Kraft's coin. "That's just a penny," he said, hoping his voice was under control.

"A very special one, Velvet. But let's get on with this. Your cube is on the left this time, and I'll move mine down to the other end of the table just so the flies can make a clear choice."

Nick held his breath and waited. Maybe, just maybe—

A fly came close, almost landed on his cube, then darted away toward the far end of the table. After a moment's inspection it came to rest on Cazar's sugar.

"Another win!" the little gambler chortled. "You don't bet against Alfred Cazar!"

"It certainly wasn't my idea," Nick agreed.

"We'd better get back on the road," Blaze suggested. "We want to make Saratoga before evening."

While Cazar and Blaze went off to the Men's Room. Nick

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drove the car up to the gas pump and had the tank filled. They were an odd pair, and he wondered if Blaze might be more than an employee. At times the two men seemed more like partners—gentle grifters plying their trade on the road to Saratoga Springs.

Presently he saw them returning to the car. Blaze got in front next to him and explained the automatic shift. He heard Cazar buckle his seat belt in back, then shut the door. "Come on, you two, let's go!"

Nick pulled onto the Thruway, taking it easy until he got the feel of the unfamiliar vehicle. "It's straight ahead about seventy-five miles to Albany," Blaze advised him.

"Thanks." Nick stepped up the speed to the legal 55, then gradually worked it to 60.

"How about another license-plate bet?" Cazar's voice asked.

"I'm broke."

"I thought I saw a ten in that wallet."

"I need something for Saratoga. Hell, you'll win more off me than I'll get paid for this article."

Blaze lit a cigarette and smoked in silence, but his boss wasn't to be shut up, "Come on, Velvet, put up that ten!"

"No, thanks."

Nick lapsed into silence and Cazar did, too. After a few more miles he glanced in the rear-view mirror but he couldn't see the little man. "Don't mind him," Blaze said softly. "If you won't bet with him he'll probably doze off for a bit."

"You been working for him long?" Nick asked, making conversation.

"A year or so. He's a good boss. It's easy work."

They passed two cars and had a clear highway ahead. Before Nick realized it, his speed had slipped past 65, on the way to 70. That was when he heard the siren and glanced in the mirror. "Damn! State Police."

Blaze cursed and put out his cigarette. "Take the ticket. Mr. Cazar will pay it."

As the trooper strolled up and asked for his license, Nick glanced into the back seat for Cazar. "Where is he?" he asked Blaze. "Is he on the floor?"

Blaze peered over the seat back. "He's not there. He's gone! His seat belt is still fastened, but he's gone!"

"What is all this?" the trooper asked.

"We lost a passenger," Nick said. He got out on his side and yanked open the rear door. It was true. Alfred Cazar had vanished.

"You mean you forgot him somewhere?"

"He was in the car," Blaze insisted, looking blank.

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"I saw him get in," Nick agreed. "We were talking to him!"

Nick bit his lip. His mind had a vision of the Bermuda penny—and his $20,000 fee—flying away from him. "I know! He's a small man, and some cars have back seats that have access to the trunk compartment. That's where he's got to be!"

He unlocked the trunk, but it was empty except for a spare tire and a jack. Blaze was on his knees, peering beneath the car, and Nick joined him.

There was no trace of Alfred Cazar.

"Maybe he jumped out when we stopped," Blaze said. "But we didn't hear the door open."

The trooper shook his head. "Nobody jumped out when you stopped. Now let's quit the kidding around. I don't care how many people vanished from the back seat—you're still gettin' a ticket for speeding!"

As the trooper wrote the ticket, Nick was forced to admit Cazar had vanished into thin air, from the back seat of a closed car going nearly 70 miles an hour.

For eleven months of the year Saratoga Springs had a quiet village atomosphere befitting its population of less than 20,000 people. Even the one-time fame of its waters and mud baths had declined in recent years, leaving it with the perpetual gloom of an off-season spa. Only in August, during the racing days, was there still a flash of the old glory. It wasn't quite like the early days, when the racing season brought the country's biggest mobsters to the spa for wide-open gambling. But enough remained on this fine August afternoon to give Nick a feeling of what once had been.

He dropped Hugo Blaze at the old Gideon Putnam Hotel and then drove on in search of a room for himself. It was difficult to find one without a reservation, but just then a room for the night was the least of his worries.

A few horse trailers were parked along Union Avenue, shaded by the stately elms, and he discovered to his surprise that the racetrack was quite near the center of town. He might want to visit the track later, but right now he was more interested in seeing Jeanne Kraft. He parked in the lot next to the Grand Union Motel and went inside to find her.

She wasn't in her room, but he located her in the hotel coffee shop, munching on a tuna-fish sandwich. "I'm glad you got

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here," she said as he slipped into the booth. "Any trouble?"

"Depends what you mean by trouble. Alfred Cazar has disappeared and taken the Bermuda penny with him."

"You mean he's run off?"

"I mean he's disappeared." He told her everything that had happened. "This guy Blaze is at the Gideon Putnam Hotel, hoping he'll get some word from Cazar. I'm supposed to see him there later."

"It was a trick of some sort," Jeanne Kraft said. "Cazar used to do some night-club magic, along with being a mimic and impressionist. He showed you the penny to watch your reaction. When you were interested, he must have guessed I hired you. He disappeared to keep you from stealing the penny."

"But how? And where do I find him now?"

"That's what I'm paying you $20,000 for."

"Yeah."

"Don't blame yourself entirely. He's a clever man."

"My only chance of finding him now is to learn what this is all about—what makes his Bermuda penny so valuable. Isn't it about time you told me?"

"I—" She hesitated, glancing around nervously. "All right, I suppose I have to tell you. It started some years back, in Bermuda. My father, Jesse Kraft, was one of the wealthiest men in Hamilton. My mother was dead and I was the only child, so I was naturally very close to him. His one weakness was poker. He'd meet once a week for a high-stakes game with a half-dozen other wealthy men and whoever happened to be visiting the island. Sometimes these Friday night games would go on till Sunday morning."

"Did he usually win or lose?"

"Mostly win. But one night there was a really big game with over a hundred thousand dollars on the table. My father was in it, and Alfred Cazar, and a Canadian named Brian Chetwind. They kept raising each other until everyone else was forced to drop out. Then, when my father and Cazar raised Chetwind more cash than he had on him, the Canadian said he'd have to use IOUs. Anyway, to make the story brief, by the end of the evening my father and Cazar were each in possession of a Bermuda penny on which the Canadian had scratched his mark with a knife. And each of these pennies was an IOU for $60,000."

"Why a penny? Why not a traditional IOU?"

"The pennies were still new in 1971. Bermuda had only

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adopted a dollar-decimal currency a year earlier. Then too, Chetwind was an important Canadian businessman who couldn't risk having his name signed to an ordinary IOU. Naturally the marked pennies had no legal standing as collectable debts, but then neither would regular IOUs."

"Why hasn't the money been collected from Chetwind before this?"

"My father and Cazar met him here at Saratoga in August of '71, but he persuaded them to let the gambling debt ride. He promised they could double their money through investments he'd make in Canadian mines. Since they had none of their own money to lose, they agreed. This August full payment is to be made. Each of the two shares is now worth something like $130,000."

"A goodly sum," Nick admitted. "But where's your father?"

"Some months back, when the full value of their shares became known, my father was struck and killed by a hit-and-run driver in Miami Beach. I'm convinced he was murdered by Alfred Cazar."

"For the penny?"

"For the penny. Chetwind knows both men were inveterate gamblers. If Cazar produced both pennies, with the story that he'd won my father's in a poker game, Chetwind would accept it without question."

"But you have the penny." Nick said. "You showed it to me."

"My father had it hidden where Cazar couldn't find it. But the very fact that both my father's body and his home were searched told me that Cazar was behind the crime. If I can't bring him to justice any other way, I'll at least turn the tables on him—by stealing his Bermuda penny."

"I don't kill people," Nick warned her.

"I didn't ask you to kill him. I asked you to steal the penny."

"He might not surrender it while he lives. He's already proven to be a very clever customer."

Jeanne Kraft eyed Nick with something close to disdain. "Those things he pulled on you were tricks and nothing more. If you fell for them, you deserved to lose your money."

"What do you mean 'tricks'?"

"The license-plate bet. It's not a 50-50 proposition at all. The odds were seven to five in Cazar's favor. You can find the mathematics of it in any good book on gambling. Try *Scarne's Complete Guide to Gambling* and it'll also tell you how he worked the sugar-cube stunt."

"You mean that was a trick, too?"

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She nodded. "Sometime before the bet the two sugar cubes were doctored. A drop of insecticide was placed on one side of each cube. To start with, both of these sides were facing up. Then, after you chose your cube, he turned his over while positioning it. The flies were kept away from your cube, but landed on his."

"I'll be damned," Nick said.

"It's so simple when you know how."

"But what about his vanishing trick in the car? Any ideas about that?"

Jeanne Kraft shook her head. "I've never heard that one done before."

But Nick had. He'd heard about it quite recently, in fact. Gloria had read something in the newspaper about it.

"I have to find a phone," he said.

"What about the penny?"

"When are you meeting Chetwind?"

"Tomorrow morning at the racing museum. Ten o'clock."

"I'll be there."

Nick took a room for himself at the Holiday Inn and phoned home to Gloria. "Nicky, what's happened?" she asked, alarmed to be hearing from him. He wasn't in the habit of calling while away.

"Nothing. I'm okay. I just need some information. Remember that newspaper article you read about the hitchhiker vanishing from the back seat of a car?"

"Yes?"

"Get it and read it to me, will you?"

She left the phone and returned after a few minutes. The newspaper article was just as she'd first reported it—a bizarre account of a white-clad hippie hitchhiker who vanished from the back seats of autos after speaking of religion and judgment. The source for the story was given as a Professor Trout, folklorist at State University in Albany.

"Thanks, Gloria. That's what I wanted."

"Will you be home soon?"

"Maybe by tomorrow night, the way things are going."

"Be careful."

"I always am."

He hung up and put through a call to the State University. Professor Trout was not on campus during the summer, but he managed to obtain a home phone number. With one more call he had the man on the wire.

"I know," Trout said, speaking briskly. "It's the damned article. The phone's been ringing here all week. I suppose you have a disappearance to report too."

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"In a way," Nick admitted. "But I have a couple of questions to ask you first. The paper says you're a folklorist."

"That's right."

"Meaning you don't really believe any of these happenings."

"Not exactly," Trout answered carefully. "Folklore is often based on distorted truths."

"I just want an answer, Professor. Are these reports about vanishing hitchhikers to be believed?"

"Oh, yes, as far as they go. You have to realize that the original reports came from young people—kids pretty well into the drug culture."

"Oh? Does that explain how he disappeared?"

"I think so. These kids often drive when they're high on something—just as adults do, unfortunately. Since many hallucinogens give one a distorted time-sense, it's quite likely a driver picked up a hitchhiker, talked with him, dropped him off somewhere without realizing or remembering it, and then really believed he simply vanished from the car. Once a story like that gets started, you always receive accounts of people with similar experiences."

"That's the only explanation you've come up with?" Nick asked, unable to conceal his disappointment. He knew he hadn't been high on anything when Alfred Cazar vanished.

"What other possibility is there?"

"None, I suppose," Nick answered with a sigh. "Thank you, Professor."

Though it was late afternoon, Nick walked a mile east on Lincoln Avenue to the Saratoga Race Course. The day's races were just finishing as he reached the gate, and he stood aside to watch the faces of the people as they exited. Happy, sad, glowing, disgruntled—their faces told their day's fortunes. He watched one man empty his pockets of losing tickets and walk on, while another immediately pounced on them to search for an overlooked winner.

He'd come in hopes of catching a glimpse of a reincarnated Alfred Cazar, but the little man was nowhere visible in the crowd. Finally, as the departing throng thinned, he gave up and headed back to the red-brick Gideon Putnam Hotel to see Hugo Blaze.

The bulky man was in his room, and when he let Nick in he motioned him to a chair. "I'm on the phone," he explained. "Won't be a minute."

Nick heard him talking to New York, apparently reporting to someone on the disap-

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pearance of Alfred Cazar. When he hung up, Nick asked, "Any word of him back there?"

"Not a thing. He seems to have dropped off the face of the earth."

"Are you going to stay here?"

Blaze shrugged. "Why not? My salary is paid for another two weeks, and my job was to accompany him up here. I can only assume he'll turn up."

Nick nodded. "Let's get something to eat."

All the while they were dining in the elegant and spacious room downstairs, Nick's thoughts were somewhere else. Cazar had the Bermuda penny, and Cazar had disappeared. There was no way to steal it unless he could find the man, and that seemed impossible.

"Saratoga has changed a great deal these past years," Blaze was saying. "The gambling casino is now a museum, and most of the big old hotels are gone. They even issue health warnings about the mineral water."

"There must be someplace you can find a decent poker game," Nick suggested.

"Oh, sure. You interested?"

"I might be." Nick was remembering the Canadian, Brian Chetwind, and his liking for poker. If he planned to meet Jeanne in the morning at the racing museum, the odds were he was already in town. And he might well be found at a high-stakes game.

So after dinner they took the rented car and drove up North Broadway to a rambling white guest house on the edge of town. "This place was here at the turn of the century," Hugh Blaze explained. "And there was gambling here then."

He led Nick inside, through sitting rooms still lush with opulence of another era. Finally, in the rear, they passed through a double door into a large game room. Here seven men sat around a green-topped poker table moving their stacks of chips in and out of play like the money moguls they probably were. Nick noticed a craps table at one side of the room too, but for the moment all the action was on poker.

Nick studied the faces of the men at the table, trying to decide if one might be the Canadian. He listened to the names they called each other, but there seemed to be no Brian at the table. "This the only game around?" Nick asked Blaze.

"It's the best game around. There's usually one in the back room at the Orange Dollar, too."

"Let's try that."

The Orange Dollar was an old-fashioned roadhouse a bit farther along North Broadway.

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The back-room poker game was noisier and more crowded here, and Nick knew at once he'd found the right place. "Raise you, Chetwind," one of the players was saying as he entered, addressing a tall man who sat with his back to the door.

"You going to stay around here?" Blaze asked Nick.

"I think so, for a while."

"I'm going off to the track. Rather lose my money on a horse than a deck of cards, any day."

"Racing at night?"

"They've got a harness track that operates at night. I told you this was a swinging place."

After Hugo Blaze left, Nick remained watching the poker game. One busted player offered his chair, but Nick shook his head. He hadn't come to gamble, only to speak to Brian Chetwind.

After about an hour the Canadian cashed in his chips and rose from the chair with a wide stretch of his arms. "Enough for now. I'll see you birds tomorrow."

He sauntered over to a little bar at one end of the room and Nick joined him there. "You're Brian Chetwind, aren't you?"

The Canadian was tall and handsome, with gray hair fashionably styled across his forehead. He looked like money.

"That's me. Do I know you?"

"Nick Velvet's the name. I'm doing some work for an acquaintance of yours—Jeanne Kraft."

The tall Canadian nodded. "Lovely young lady. Terrible thing about her father."

"I understand you're meeting her tomorrow."

"That's correct. We have a business deal to close."

"And Alfred Cazar?"

"Cazar? You know him, too?"

"Yes," Nick admitted. "I drove up here with him from New York."

"Glad he's here. I've been looking for him."

"I'll be frank, Mr. Chetwind. I know something of your dealings with Cazar and the late Jesse Kraft. I know about the two Bermuda pennies."

"I see. And what is your interest?"

"I'm looking after Miss Kraft's interests. It's important that I know if Cazar has contacted you today."

"I told you I'd been looking for him, didn't I?" Chetwind was growing impatient. "If you're some sort of strongarm man hired by Miss Kraft, you can be assured that I intend to pay my debts."

"Nothing like that," Nick said. "She'll see you in the morning, Mr. Chetwind."

He left the Canadian and

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went outside. Hugo Blaze had taken the car, and it was necessary to hire a taxi to drive him to the Grand Union Motel where Jeanne was staying. During the ride he couldn't help considering a possibility which hadn't occurred to Jesse Kraft's daughter. There was someone besides Alfred Cazar with a motive for killing Kraft and stealing his Bermuda penny.

Brian Chetwind would have the strongest motive in the world—if he wasn't able to pay off his debts.

Nick hadn't really expected Jeanne Kraft to sit in her room all night, but it was frustrating nonetheless when she failed to answer his knock. There were too many places where she might be—the harness track, the concert, the summer theater, or even one of the mineral baths.

He was about to walk away when he heard a sound, very low, from the other side of her door. "Jeanne? Are you in there?" he called.

The low sound was repeated, and now he recognized it as a moan. He tried the door but it was locked. "Jeanne!"

". . . help me . . ." she said from the other side of the door, her voice little more than a whisper.

"Can you reach the knob to open the door?"

There was a few moments' pause, then the door opened. Jeanne Kraft was sagging against the wall, holding her head. "He was waiting for me, Nick. He hit me."

"Who hit you?"

"I didn't see him, but it must have been—" Her eyes caught sight of the purse on the floor, its contents scattered across the rug. She dropped to her knees and pawed through the purse, then gasped out, "Cazar! He stole my Bermuda penny!"

"You're sure it's gone?"

"Of course I'm sure! I had it hidden inside the lining here."

"Sorry I didn't get here sooner."

Her face was a picture of dejection. "So now he's got both pennies."

"Or neither."

"What?"

"Have you considered the possibility that Chetwind might have killed your father, made Cazar disappear from that car, and assaulted you—all to keep from paying his gambling debts?"

"But he's a wealthy man!"

"Is he? I was with him tonight. He left a poker game quite early, and it wasn't the biggest game in town."

"I still think it was Cazar. If only you could find him!"

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"To know where he is I have to know how he pulled that vanishing act," Nick said. "Believe me, I've been thinking about it ever since it happened. Funny thing—it's almost as if the wrong man disappeared. If it had been Hugo Blaze who vanished instead of Cazar, I'd know how it was done."

But she wasn't listening. She sat looking at her purse and shaking her head. "What will I do now, Nick?"

"Meet Chetwind as planned tomorrow morning, just as if you still had the penny. In fact, I think we'll both go meet him."

The town awoke slowly, perhaps with a hangover from the night before, and Nick and Jeanne had the coffee shop almost to themselves for breakfast. "What happens at the museum?" he asked. "It would seem a pretty public place for a meeting."

"At ten each morning they show films of the previous day's races. I'm to meet Chetwind there, but we'll probably go elsewhere for the actual exchange." Then, remembering, she added, "Of course, I no longer have anything to exchange."

"Let me worry about that. If Cazar has both pennies, he'll show up for the meeting, too. If he doesn't have them, that puts the finger on Chetwind."

"And you'll get them back for me? Both of them?"

"Both of them," he assured her. "And it won't cost you anything extra. Two for the price of one."

By ten o'clock there was a fair crowd at the National Museum of Racing, across Union Avenue from the track itself. Nick let Jeanne walk ahead of him and enter the darkened area where films of the previous day's races would be shown. He stayed near a display case, looking over past racing trophies while he kept an eye on the main entrance.

He'd only been watching a few moments when Brian Chetwind hurried through the doors, heading straight for the film without a glance to his right or left. A minute later Hugo Blaze strode in.

Nick hesitated only an instant. The whole caper had been one big gamble from the beginning, with license plates, sugar cubes, horses, and cards. Now it was time for him to gamble. "Blaze!" he called softly. "Over here!"

Hugo Blaze paused, hesitated, then walked over to the display case where Nick stood. "What's up?"

"In here," Nick said, motioning toward the Men's Room door. "It's important."

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Hugo Blaze stepped inside, looking puzzled, and Nick followed him. A moment later Nick came out alone and headed across the lobby toward the film showing. Jeanne Kraft was just emerging with Chetwind.

"Nick, what can I do? He's ready to pay off, but he needs the coins!"

"Wait here a moment," Nick told the Canadian. Then he steered Jeanne back across the lobby to the Men's Room door.

"In there?"

Nick nodded. "I want you to meet Mr. Hugo Blaze."

He opened the door wide enough so she could see the unconscious man sprawled on the tile floor. "But—but, Nick, that's not Blaze! That's Alfred Cazar!"

Nick Velvet smiled. "I just won a bet with myself. And here, young lady, are your two Bermuda pennies."

Nick and Jeanne left Saratoga by car later that day. For them the season was over. "Look!" she exclaimed, holding up for Nick the thick packets of bonds that Brian Chetwind had given her. "They're worth more than a quarter of a million on today's market!"

"He's an honest man."

She nodded agreement. "That's more than I can say about Cazar. But how did you know he was Blaze? And how did they work that disappearance from the car?"

"When I first met the older man in his hotel room at the Waldorf, he simply said he was Cazar and I believed him. But right from the start I felt there was something funny. Blaze kept calling him 'boss,' overdoing the supposed relationship.

"The fake Cazar showed me the Bermuda penny for two reasons—to see if I was interested, and to fool me as to its location. When I revealed my interest, they knew I'd been hired by you, and they used a clever dodge like the old shell game. The fake Cazar simply slipped the penny to the real Cazar and then the fake Cazar disappeared. I couldn't steal it if I thought it had vanished along with him. The penny was only inches away from me all the time, yet it was safer than in a bank vault."

"But *how* did the fake Cazar disappear?"

"They'd just given me the job of driving a strange car. I saw them come back and heard the fake Cazar in the rear seat. Fastening his seat belt. Then he slammed the door. That should have told me something. It's far more natural to close the door *before* you fasten the belt. But back-seat belts aren't

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connected to any buzzer system, and I simply assumed he was still in the car.

"Meanwhile, the real Cazar —or Blaze—was distracting my attention by explaining the car's automatic shift. I started up, with Cazar's voice talking to me from the back seat, and drove away. In reality my back-seat passenger was left behind, probably crouched behind a gas pump. His work was done, and he probably got a cab or hitched a ride back to New York."

"But the voice!"

"You told me yourself that Cazar had been a night-club entertainer—a mimic and impressionist. I suspect he knew a little ventriloquism, too. While he sat in the front seat calmly smoking a cigarette, he was imitating the absent man's voice in such a way that it appeared to come from the rear. I couldn't see him in my rear-view mirror, but I certainly believed he was there.

"I suppose the article in the newspaper the other day about the vanishing hitchhiker gave them the idea for the stunt. Its main purpose was to send me off after a phantom Cazar while the Bermuda penny made a safe trip to Saratoga Springs."

"But what put you onto Blaze—or Cazar—this morning?"

"Remember, I told you last night the wrong man had disappeared. I was considering the possibility I'd been duped by a ventriloquist and mimic. Cazar fitted the bill, but he was the one who vanished. I couldn't believe both men in the car had that talent.

"But then I remembered how quickly Blaze left me last night when we stopped by a poker game where Chetwind was playing. He couldn't risk the Canadian seeing him and calling him by his real name. This morning Blaze showed up when I was expecting Cazar, and I took a gamble. I slugged him in the Men's Room and went through his pockets. He had both Bermuda pennies, ready to hand over to Chetwind."

"Will he come after me now?"

"I doubt it. He's a gambler and he knows when he's beaten. Besides, he won't want the police digging into your father's death. If he does give you trouble, have him arrested for assaulting you in your room last night."

"How can I ever thank you?"

Nick had an answer. "You can start by paying me the balance of my fee. Then we'll go on from there."

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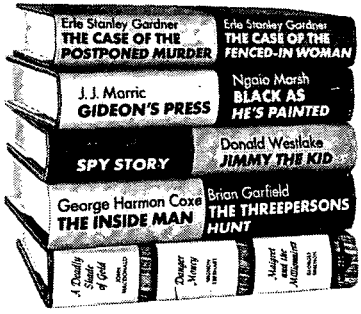

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